

# ANTHROPIATIONS

The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #5

July, 2002



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Anthrolations is published approximately twice a year by Sofawolf Press. We welcome submissions of original first-run fiction which features anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters and explores their interaction with the characters around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words – but longer or shorter stories are happily considered, depending on available space. Anthrolations also welcomes artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

## **Subscriptions**

We regret that we are unable to handle subscriptions at this time. Anthrolations will be available for purchase at some conventions, or via mail order. See the Sofawolf Press web site for details.



## **Notes from the Editor's Desk**

So the first thing you are probably wondering is why Anthrolations #5 is coming out in July instead of in January. A fair question...

You see, life for me over the last 10 months has been kind of like a road trip westward from the city of Boston. You start out in a comfortable routine for the most part, dealing with the occasional Buffalo, Erie, and Cleveland with only a slight change in your speed and direction. Sure, things may be a little boring and predictable, but you turn up the music and set your hopes on the next service area — where if you are lucky you might find a decent cup of coffee and a meal that doesn't necessarily include fries.

Then, just when you think the road you've been traveling might go on forever, you suddenly come to the Ohio border. The relatively predictable ribbon of highway that was Interstate 90 becomes twisted and confusing, and you start to lose your way amongst the metallic frameworks and fire-spouting towers of Gary, Indiana, looking for all the world like a level from Sonic the Hedgehog. As you fight to keep your bearings and your wits 1-90 plunges you headlong into Chicago, Illinois, where you alternate between the dead calm of traffic jams and the sheer terror of actually moving in the midst of Chicago drivers.

Yet, all the while you know that something wonderful lies ahead beyond the stop and go toll-booths that saturate the road north and west of the city. You break through into Wisconsin, stop at a cheese hut, and feel that things

are once again right with the world — even if you still have 5 hours of highway to navigate until you get to the jewel of the north-central Midwest, Minneapolis Minnesota.

Over the last 10 months: I gave notice at my job of more than 10 years, saw our world turn upside-down on September 11th, saw MY world turn right-side-up in early October when I met someone who was worth taking a chance on (and who wasn't already in love with someone else), acted on a gut feeling, packed my truck with everything I could fit in it, said goodbye to my hometown of 31 years, and moved myself and my husky to Minneapolis to start a new life on January 1st. I spent three months unemployed and seeking work in the computer field along with 1500+ other applicants in the Twin Cities area, wrestled with learning to call soda "pop" and say "you betcha" a lot, adjusted to Midwest culture, and baked a lot of bread in the rental house my mate and I found in a nice northwestern suburb of Saint Paul.

As of the date of this writing I have seen the chance I took work out better than I could possibly have hoped, found a job I am enjoying very much, have finally finished filling out the mountains of paper forms and checks for large sums of money which are required when you move from one state to another, have learned how to pronounce "Wabasha", have seen it snow in May, and have started appending "don'tcha know" to the ends of sentences. Life is, for the most part, back on the straight and narrow, albeit with different scenery and far nicer with a co-pilot. Hopefully I'll get to stay put for a bit.

Of course, my geographical position wasn't the only thing to change recently. In January Sofawolf Press released our first book — the shared world anthology "Breaking the Ice," edited by Tim Susman (who, I should note, moved in January as well). We have gotten a lot of enthusiastic response to the collection and are already at work on a second volume. In addition, we have two other books in the development phase, and a new HistoriMorphs issue scheduled for January 2003. Our website has undergone some dramatic redesign, and is now easier to navigate, frameless, and (most importantly) allows you to purchase our products on-line!

Lastly, as our returning readers will notice, we've made some changes to the layout and design of Anthrolations. The new format is more space-efficient and easier to navigate, allowing us to add a couple new features in the coming issues.

One thing we haven't changed is the quality of the stories and illustrations! Thank you for your patience with our delays and my editorial rambling. Now, go read the good stuff!



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# Six

## Samuel C. Conway

Samuel Conway's work has appeared in the anthologies *Flights of Fantasy* (Mercedes Lackey, ed., DAW Books, 1999) and *Breaking the Ice: Stories from New Tibet* (Tim Susman, ed., Sofawolf Press, 2002), as well as numerous small press publications. He holds a doctorate in organic chemistry from Dartmouth, and works in the agrochemical industry in his native state of Pennsylvania.

Stephanie Hahn lives in NY and currently works as a graphic designer for a major pet-products manufacturer but hopes to do illustration work someday. Her preferred subjects are mythological beasts, big cats, were-creatures, anthros, prehistoric animals, and anything to do with heraldry or symbolism.

I am all at once a scientist, a humanitarian and a lover of animals. Those traits often combine to produce some truly memorable experiences. Such events as those of a winter night not too long ago become almost an inevitability when you throw into the mix a cat named Elvis.

Volunteering for the Red Cross, specifically in disaster recovery service, satisfies the humanitarian part of me. There is no joy that can rival that gained from helping out a fellow human being in an hour of great need. There is also no greater discomfort than standing up to your waist in sewage-swirled floodwater, but the humanitarian side never really minded that much. In the end, I suppose I'm a martyr. It helps to explain why I found myself choking on the smoke of a burning building in a section of Philadelphia we called The Badlands.

It was a row home, of course. Most of Philadelphia is made of row homes. They are a sad remnant of the city's industrial past, and like the skeletal factory buildings that are crumbling on every block, many of them are abandoned. Up in The Badlands it is not uncommon for only one single

house to be occupied on an entire block of leaning, gutted structures. That was the sort of area that I was called to that night. Four empty homes were burning, which might not have been such a crisis if the fifth did not contain an old lady in a wheelchair. When I arrived I could see a fireman rushing inside as smoke billowed out of the doorway around him. From outside I could hear him arguing with her. "No, you can't stay!" the fireman's voice barked. "You gotta get out of here or you're gonna burn up! Come on!"

I squinted through the smoke but could see nothing. It was like trying to look through a chalkboard, or would have been if I had been able to keep my eyes open for more than a second. Smoke from a house fire wreaks havoc on the eyes, even when it looks thin and harmless. It's one of the reasons people are often found dead just inches away from a convenient exit. Struggling to see, I called out, "This is the Red Cross. Do you need help in there?"

"Yeah!" the fireman shouted back. "Reach in and grab the front of this wheelchair."

I groped forward through the pall, and finding a metal bar, grabbed it and pulled. A wheelchair slid ponderously out of the smoke and into view. Crammed into its seat was what was undoubtedly the most morbidly obese woman I had ever seen. She was so immense that the wheels on her chair were warped from the weight they had to carry. The humanitarian side of me began to falter slightly, worrying, along with the other sides, about the fact that volunteers do not get Workman's Compensation.

There were six steps leading down from her front door. Small wonder that the poor thing was a shut-in. Fortunately, one of my teammates, Mark, came running from across the street, and between the three of us we were able to wrestle her and her chair down the stairs and onto the sidewalk. As we stopped to rest, a little black and white shape darted out of the smoke, down the sidewalk, and straight into the basement window of the next vacant house in line. The poor lady immediately started to sob. "My kitty!" she wailed. "Someone get my kitty!"

Mark gave me a pained look, and gently patted her hand, "He's safe, Ma'am," he said soothingly. "He went right into that basement there." We both cringed as she began to cry harder. Mark tried again. "He's not in any danger. We'll get him later. He'll be all right down there, really..."

Inconsolable, the woman became hysterical. "He won't be all right! He's never been outside before! He'll get lost! Oh, I can't lose him! He's all I

have!"

My heart broke. As I said, I do love animals, and I happen to have a particular affinity for cats. My concern for the cat and pity for the poor lady overwhelmed my common sense, and I committed the First Mortal Sin of disaster service. "Don't worry, Ma'am," I said firmly, "I'll get your kitty for you. I promise."

Mark looked at me as if I'd lost my mind, and dragged me a few yards away while the paramedics worked on the victim. "You nut case!" he whispered harshly. "How could you say that to her?"

"Why not?" I said stubbornly. "I'm going to go get her cat."

"Like hell you are. You can't go in there."

"Sure I can. It's our job to provide comfort, right? She's not going to get any comfort without her cat."

Mark shook his head. "Fine," he muttered. "I don't know you." He turned and stalked away. We had been through similar disagreements before, although the fact that Mark was always right about them never did deter me from doing stupid things.

I thought it would be a simple matter to retrieve the cat, but when I stepped through the open doorway of the house I could see that the floor was too badly rotted to support my weight. Undaunted, I slipped back out and crouched down by the broken window into which the cat had disappeared.

The basement was piled high with garbage and pieces of the floor that had collapsed decades ago. I could hear the cat yowling unhappily in the darkness, and as I played my flashlight beam across a mountain of old rags I caught sight of two green eyes glowing eerily back at me. "Well," I said with a mournful sigh, "it's why they give us helmets." I sat down, then fed my legs through the narrow window and slithered my way inside. The floor felt solid enough under my feet when they landed. "Here, kitty kitty," I whispered. "Here, puss puss." I stumbled over some old tires that had been thrown down there and cursed under my breath. "Come on, you stupid cat!"

Mark's voice suddenly floated in through the window. "His name is Elvis."

"What?"

"I said his name is Elvis." I could almost hear the smirk in his voice. "Try calling him."

"Cats don't come when you call them."

"Maybe not. But I just wanna hear you say it." I wanted to make a snappy retort, but instead I just grunted as I tripped over something else that lay unseen in the darkness. Whatever it was, it was probably horrible. Mark laughed. "Serves you right. Give me a call if you need rescuing."

I swore again as I heard him moving away from the window. He was right, of course. Never make a promise to a disaster victim, especially one you can't keep. I'd opened my mouth though, and thus I had committed myself. Shuffling my feet to keep from falling, I inched my way over to the rag-pile and shined the light on it. The beam again caught two luminous orbs peering out from the depths of the pile. "There you are. Come on out now. The fat lady's waiting."

There was a pitiful mewl off to my left. Swinging the light around, I caught a flash of black and white fur. There, prancing nervously atop an overturned oil tank, was Elvis. His ears were tucked back and his tail was puffed out thicker than my wrist. His eyes, I could not help noticing, were glowing orange in the light. "What the hell?"



Suddenly I felt very, very cold.

Very slowly I turned the flashlight back to where those green orbs were still peering balefully back at me. I stood motionless and just stared as my brain registered what lay before me. I was certain that the smoke had damaged my eyes somehow, or maybe the fire had burned up something the crack dealers had left behind in one of the vacant houses. The only thing that I knew was that what lay before me could not possibly be real.

Half-hidden in the rag pile was a monster. At first I would have called it a tiger, since that is what its head and face most closely resembled. But the arm that was visible was distinctly human, although it was covered with

dark orange fur, complete with black tiger stripes. There were other stripes, too, which I realized were dark trails of blood. For a moment I feared that the thing had recently killed something and that no doubt I was going to be next, but then I realized that the blood had come from the creature itself. Its eyes, now that I could see them more clearly, were dull and drooping. Its mouth was open, its breath ragged and wheezing. "Yo, Sam!"

I almost jumped out of my boots. Mark's flashlight beam played through the window. "Did you get that damned cat yet?"

"No, I—I found... Mark, there's..."

His voice grew concerned. "What?"

The words caught in my throat. The creature's eyes had closed. It was too weak even to keep them open any longer.

I am still not certain why I didn't tell Mark. Maybe I was afraid that the thing was all in my head, and Mark would think I was a lunatic. More than likely, though, my fear *was* that the creature was real, and somehow I could not bear to face the implications of such a staggering discovery.

"Sam?" Mark's voice was agitated. He was starting to climb down through the window.

"I got him," I blurted out, still staring at the silent hulk before me. "I mean, I had him. He's pretty scared. Give me some light *over there to the left.*"

Mark's flashlight beam found the cat. "Well, grab him and throw him out here. We're taking the old lady to her sister's."

It took a tremendous force of will to drag myself away from the creature. I kept looking back, as though I thought it might vanish if I took my attention off of it for too long.

Elvis seemed more than happy to see me when I reached him, his first time outside having proven not at all to his liking. He purred and clung tightly to my sleeve when I picked him up. I picked my way to the window with him and handed him out to Mark, who tucked the cat safely inside his vest and then held a hand down to help me up. I paused one more time and swung the beam back toward the pile.

From where I stood I could see only rags. Had there really been anything else there?

"What is it?" Mark said.

I chewed my lip, convinced that I should tell Mark that there was something down in the basement, something that I could not believe and that he had to see for himself, but what came out was, "Nothing. Just creepy down here. Give me a hand."

For me, the rest of the evening was a blur. A valiant effort by the firemen saved the old lady's house, although it would take several days of airing out before she and Elvis could return. Mark kept asking me if I was all right, and I told him that I'd gotten too much smoke that evening and that I was going to go home and rest. Instead, I drove around the quiet streets of the neighborhoods just south of the Badlands and tried to make sense of what I thought I had seen.

There was one undeniable fact: what I had seen in the basement of that rotting home was simply impossible. No such creature could exist. The combination of the smoke, the stress, and yes, probably something illicit floating in the air had surely made my mind play tricks. I reminded myself how the tiger-like face had vanished once I stepped back from the pile. In fact, I hadn't seen it all that clearly to begin with. Some of the old rags were probably orange and striped with motor oil or something.

The whole situation was laughable. Imagine, a grown man, a scientific professional at that, getting so frightened by an imaginary monster in the basement. I laughed as I told myself over and over how silly and childish I was being, all the way back to the Badlands in the small hours of the morning.

The neighborhood, naturally, was utterly dark when I arrived. The woman in the wheelchair had been its only permanent resident, if you did not count the dealers who occasionally used the empty houses as places of business. Even those were few and far between in that part of the city. It was as though even they could not bear to stay for long in the endless, decaying rows. Even so, one or two might have decided to pay a visit once the firemen had left, perhaps to see what might be stirred up out of the ashes. I was furious with myself for taking my life into my hands that way, for purposefully marching into something out of a post-apocalyptic nightmare just because of a stupid hallucination.

But I had to be sure.

The air that wafted up from the empty window frame reeked of smoke and mildew. If anything was down there, it was unlikely that it could breathe that noxious mixture. It was a miracle that Elvis and I had not asphyxiated

during our brief stay. I played the flashlight beam inside and squinted through the lingering haze of smoke at the pile of rags.

There was nothing there to see. It was just old, dirty, decomposing cloth. That was why I was cursing so viciously as I slithered back down through the window and felt my way across the debris toward the pile. I knew that the only way I could relax would be to convince myself once and for all that the monster was entirely in my mind, so I leaned down and placed a hand upon the first patch of orange I saw.

I felt warmth, and fur. Then something slammed hard into my chest with the force of an onrushing truck. For a second I had an odd sensation of weightlessness, and then my back crashed painfully into a post. The wood gave way with a dull crack and clattered to the floor behind me. The flashlight flew out of my hand and whirled to the floor. In the wildly spinning beam I could see a hulking figure rising from the pile. Green eyes flashed above terrifying fangs. The scream that tore out of my mouth was loud and shrill, the kind a mouse makes as a hungry cat seizes it in its claws.

The beast raised its arms and made itself look immense, and then almost at once the ferocious glow of its eyes faded. It shuddered, then lurched backward, landing with a muffled sound amongst the rags.

The basement was silent, except for the sound of my own tortured breathing. My eyes were burning from the smoke and tears were flowing down my cheeks, but I could not close them, nor could I take them away from the hulking shape in front of me. I realized only later that I had wet my pants.

It took quite a long time for me to gather enough courage to reach for the flashlight. I was terrified that if I so much as twitched the beast would come to life once more. At last I had the light in my hand and began painfully inching toward the window, which seemed to be a mile and a half away. My back ached terribly, but fortunately the rotted old post had broken before any of my bones had. I did not have time to reflect on my injuries, though, for fear that I would sustain quite a few more if I did not get myself out of there fast.

It seemed to take forever before I reached the window. I held the flashlight out ahead of me, hoping that I might be able to fend the monster off for the precious few seconds it would take me to scramble up and out. In my mind's eye I could see myself clawing my way out, only to be seized by the ankle by a huge striped hand and dragged helplessly back down inside. The image

unnerved me to the point of panic, but I knew that to bolt now would surely bring the monster lurching after me. I moved a single inch and then stopped, then another inch, then waited again. The window was behind my head now. If I could only get enough leverage to worm my shoulders through...

A low, rumbling groan rose from the rag pile and I froze. It was a surprisingly feeble sound, filled with unimaginable pain. The monster turned its face toward me, its eyes once again glowing green in the light. The ferocious teeth were hidden now. Its eyes fluttered and then sagged shut. Trails of moisture gleamed along either side of the creature's muzzle. No doubt it was suffering just as much as I was from the acrid, tenacious smoke that hung in the air.

But it still looked as though the monster was crying.

It groaned again, a pitiful sound, and turned its face away. There was no other movement save for the slow rise and fall of its chest as it struggled to breathe. It was a precious opportunity for me to make my getaway, and like an idiot, I did not take it. I was scared beyond belief, but there was something in that agonized groan that managed to hold me back despite my fear.

Once I climbed into a burning car to pull a trapped passenger out, and simple-minded people called me a hero for it. In reality, it was just a manifestation of a desire to help those in trouble that runs so deep in me that it often overwhelms my common sense. That is the only way to explain it. It was the same thing that made me crawl into filth-choked basement to retrieve a cat named Elvis that kept me from scrambling through that window and never looking back. The thing that lay before me was suffering, perhaps even dying, and somehow the thought of leaving it behind was worse than what it might do to me if I stayed.

"What are you?" I heard myself saying. The green eyes opened halfway and the creature bared its teeth ferociously, but for only a second. It shuddered and groaned, then went limp, as though the effort had taken the last of its strength. Its breathing grew more shallow.

Before I knew what I was doing I had crept forward, holding the flashlight before me like a weapon. The monster had buried itself halfway in the rags, probably in an effort to hide while it nursed its wounds. It did not react as I approached. With a quivering hand I snatched the rags away, ready to dart away if the thing made even the slightest move. It did not open its eyes, however, and I snatched away more of the rags, and before long I had

uncovered it completely. Without taking my eyes from its face I stretched forth a wary hand and touched the creature's arm.

It had not been a hallucination. I could feel the fur warm under my fingers, the flesh beneath trembling slightly. Emboldened by the lack of response, I began to explore the remarkable form. It was indeed shaped like a man, although with a tiger's head and fur. A long, thin tail lay motionless beside it. Its hands, to my surprise, bore six fingers each, and if not for the odd digit and the furry covering they could have been the hands of any man.

I had not imagined the blood, either. It matted the fur around a dozen or more deep gashes in the creature's hide. The worst injury was a trio of holes in its left thigh. Bullet holes, obviously. Two were neat and round — entry wounds — while one was jagged and ugly. That meant that one of the slugs was still inside. "Oh, man," I said whispered. "You really caught some hell, didn't you?"

The creature still did not awaken. I stepped back and swiped at my stinging eyes as I tried to think of what to do. I thought to call the police, but then what? They would be just as likely to kill the thing as soon as they saw it. Even if they did not, what would they do with it? It would probably wind up on a dissecting table in some government laboratory somewhere. I certainly could not leave it where it was, which left me very little choice. I did not relish the idea of taking what was possibly a dangerous wild animal to my home, but at the time I could see no other way to help it. If I did not do something soon it would almost surely die. And if it did, I would never know what it was. That clinched it for me. Scientific curiosity always tips the balance, and usually at the cost of common sense, which I never used much anyway.

I used some of the rags to bind the creature's wounds. That was difficult since my hands could not stop shaking. Any minute, I feared, the thing could wake up again and tear me apart. At the rear of the basement I found a boarded-up door that led to the outside. It made for a welcome exit, since it would have been impossible to hoist the creature through the window, and the plywood, once I wrenched it free, made an excellent ramp.

In the trunk of my car I used to keep an old sleeping bag, which came very much in handy that evening. There was a tense moment when the creature stirred as I was trying to roll it onto the bag. I jumped so high I nearly hit my head on the rafters above. The green eyes opened briefly and the creature grunted. It struggled briefly as though trying to rise, and then once

again it groaned and fell unconscious. I approached it cautiously, and then hurriedly zipped the sleeping bag shut around it. If it woke up again, the sleeping bag might at least contain it for as long as it would take me to run away.

It took all the strength I could muster to drag the heavy body toward the door and up the makeshift ramp. A wise old Greek once stated that he could move the world with a lever and fulcrum upon which to place it. I owe him one for that.

I drove home with great care, since the last thing I needed was to be pulled over by the police with such a passenger slumped across my back seat. With every bump I glanced nervously over my shoulder, in constant fear that the beast might awaken and be unhappy with me for having stolen him from his hiding place. I have dealt with wild animals before and know that the old line about them knowing when you are trying to help them is a load of crap. They know you are trying to help them. The trouble is that they do not want your help. I had no reason to think that this tiger, or whatever it was, would be any different once he came to.

Thank God I live in a one-story house. With what was left of my strength I dragged the limp form into the bedroom. It was a miracle that he was still breathing after such treatment. Panting, I turned on the light and carefully unzipped the sleeping bag to get a better look at what was inside. Seeing him for the first time in full light took my breath away. Whatever had created him, be it Nature or Science or Whatever, it knew exactly what it was doing. The creature was magnificent, a perfect blend of tiger and man in a single body, a masterpiece.

And dying, I thought bitterly.

I hardly knew where to start. I could not guess how much blood he had lost; he was definitely dehydrated and probably in shock. My manhandling him couldn't have been much help. Again I thought about calling for assistance, maybe from a veterinarian, but again I dismissed the idea. It was unthinkable that the creature's existence could be kept secret if I involved other people, and I knew that once word got out, the creature would face a life of imprisonment, if he was even permitted to live. I had to help him, and I was on my own.

"You're not going to die," I whispered to him. "Not after I went through so much work to get you here."

I left him in my room and hurriedly scribbled a list of the things I would need: baby formula and medical supplies from the late-night supermarket, some syringes and needles that I could swipe from the lab at work on my way back. This time I drove as fast as I could, and within an hour I was ready to begin work on my patient.

Years ago, I worked summers at a local nature center where I learned a few tricks for nursing injured animals back to life. Those had been mostly birds, though, with the occasional raccoon or squirrel. This thing, though, was well beyond anything I had ever experienced. I had no idea where he had come from, or even if he was even a natural being. The sixth finger was a troubling reminder of that. All the way home I worried that I would wind up killing him through simple ignorance of his physiology.

The creature was still lying motionless when I returned. I had brought some tablets from the lab that were used to tranquilize pigs, but I was hesitant to use them on something in such a weakened condition, so I worked quickly to take advantage of his unconsciousness. After removing the dressings I'd fashioned from the filthy rags, I carefully cleaned each wound and bandaged it. The leg wounds I saved for last. I could only imagine how he had managed to get shot. Perhaps someone had chased him as he escaped from a secret laboratory somewhere. Maybe he had encountered some of the drug dealers who lurked in such old buildings as he had been hiding in. That would explain the gashes all over his body as well. It sent a shudder through me to think of why there might have been no witnesses to report such an encounter.

The creature's peculiar hand suddenly clenched as I probed for the bullet in his leg. I caught my breath and sweat started to trickle down my brow, but there was no further movement from the patient. My probing had reopened the wound, which was now bleeding copiously. Fighting to control the trembling in my hands I gripped the bullet with a pair of tweezers and tugged it from the hole. The hand went limp, but the creature gave no other indication of having regained consciousness. "I guess that hurt a lot, Six," I said half to myself. "I'm sorry. Just stay asleep until I'm done, OK? I don't think I want to be torn apart just yet."

I reflected on the odd name that I had given him as I flushed the bullet wounds with disinfectant. It seemed as fitting as any.

The sky was starting to lighten outside the window as I sewed the angry wound shut. I spoke in a quiet monotone as I worked — not that he could

understand me, but it helped to keep my own nerves steady. "All right, last but not least," I mumbled as I injected some sterile saline under the skin beneath his arm. The thin white fur there swelled up in a big balloon, and just as quickly began to subside as his parched flesh eagerly absorbed the fluid. At least he would not die of dehydration.

There was nothing more that I could do. "It's up to you now," I said softly. "Let's hope you're still alive in the morning." I stood back and stared at him for several long minutes and then closed the curtains, turned off the light, and left him in peace. Stretching out on the living room sofa, I fell almost instantly into an exhausted sleep.

It almost noon before I woke again. My back was stiff and sore from where Six had slammed me against the post. I could not see it, but I imagined I had quite a bruise. It was persistent evidence that the events of the night before had not been more than some bizarre dream. As quietly as I could I tiptoed to the bedroom door. There was no sound from inside. I placed my hand hesitantly on the doorknob and turned it. The click it made sounded terribly loud and made me wince. Cautiously I cracked the door open and peeked inside.

Neither the sleeping bag nor the patient was where I had left them. Curious, I opened the door further and leaned my head in. A low growl sent a shiver of fright through me, and I hurriedly slammed the door shut again. "Holy shit," I gasped out loud. "He's alive!" My elation quickly turned to alarm as question of the day became, *Now what?* It hit me all at once that I had not fully thought the matter through. The remarkable creature had survived. Now it was awake, and in my bedroom.

Even more slowly this time I opened the door and once again peered inside. Six had climbed onto the bed and was huddled upon it beneath the sleeping bag. All I could see was his angry tiger-face, his eyes glaring back at me warily.



I bit my lip. "Hello." I really did not know what else to say. "I see you're awake."

Six growled in reply and retreated further beneath the sleeping bag.

"Can you understand me?" He only glared, which disappointed me. It seemed unthinkable that a creature who looked so much like a man could have only an animal's intellect. I wanted more than anything to communicate with him, to find out where he had come from. Maybe he was still getting over the shock, I told myself. Maybe he was just too frightened and confused at the moment.

*Or maybe he's a wild animal that will rip you to shreds the first chance he gets?*

I tried not to think too much of the latter possibility as I closed the door again. Intelligent or not, my guest was no doubt going to be hungry. Still concerned that he might not be strong enough for solid food, I poured baby formula into a large bowl and carried it back to the bedroom, opening the door just far enough and just long enough to slip the offering inside.

There was no sound from within the room. Frowning, I leaned forward and pressed my ear to the door. There was no way to get the formula into

him if Six did not recognize it on his own as food. I did not want to offer him solid food, since in his weakened condition it could very well kill him. Several more silent minutes passed, and then finally I heard the creaking of the bedsprings. The floorboards depressed under my feet. I held my breath, ear pressed tightly to the door, and smiled as I heard the sound of lapping from the other side. "Good boy," I said silently.

It struck me that I was going to be stuck with this odd houseguest for possibly a considerable time, and hence I was going to need a few more supplies. For more than an hour I wandered from store to store until I managed to find one whose manager was willing to drag a child's wading pool out of storage and sell it to me. The rest of the items I needed were much easier to obtain, and I was able to return home before sunset.

Six hid under his blanket and glowered at me as I cracked opened the bedroom door and reached inside with one of my new purchases, an electric stun gun. It at least gave me the illusion of being on an even footing with a creature whose fangs were as big as my thumb. "Hi there," I said soothingly. "I'm not going to hurt you." Without taking my eyes off of him I groped for the empty bowl and held it up. "See? I brought you this. Nummy! I'll bring you some more later." As I spoke I eased the door open further. It was hard to keep a grip on the stun gun with the amount of sweat my palm was generating. Six watched intently as I edged into the room, dragging along the big plastic pool. "This is for you." I eased it down onto the floor and backed into the hallway. The next to come in was the first of five fifty-pound bags of kitty litter. That notion had been borne of desperation. It was extremely unlikely that my patient would be toilet trained, and perhaps just as unlikely that he would know how to use a litterbox, but I could not think of what else to do. The other alternative was too distasteful. I just prayed that Six would get the idea.

I was soaked with sweat by the time the last bag was emptied into the pool, though only a small part of that was from the exertion. Six made no movements other than an occasional blink. I finished by splashing a little ammonia onto the litter in hopes that it would give him a hint, then left him with another bowl of formula before backing out of the room and closing the door.

The next morning, I called in sick to work, using my most convincing fever-voice, then I went to check on Six. He looked as though he had not moved at all, still huddled under his sleeping bag on the bed. The sand in

the makeshift litterbox was disturbed, though, much to my delight, and there were other signs that Six had explored the room while I slept.

"Hello again," I whispered as I slipped into the room. "Remember me?" He did not stir as I crouched down on the floor and tried to look as non-threatening as possible. "I'm not here to hurt you. I want to help." I paused, and then shuffled a little closer, keeping my thumb on the stun gun's trigger. "Can you speak?" There was silence. "No, I guess you can't. Can you understand me, though? Can you give me some sign?"

He did not even blink. His icy stare was unnerving. The stun gun gave me courage, though, and I inched a little closer. "I'm your friend," I said soothingly. "I won't hurt you. Do you understand? You're wounded. I'll help you get better."

There was no reaction. Slowly I crept up to the bed. "It would help if you trusted me. I don't want to have to dope you up. It's dangerous. I know how much you're scared." With an exaggeratedly slow movement I lifted a gauze pad from my belt pouch and touched it to my chest. "See this? Your bandages need to be changed. I didn't nurse you this far to have you die of infection." Closer. "It won't hurt. I promise." As gingerly as I could I reached for the edge of the sleeping bag and gripped it between two fingers.

Six erupted with a furious snarl. I saw a black-and-orange wall of muscle rocketing off the bed toward me and fell back, throwing my arm up to defend myself. Claws flashed through the air. I felt a tug at my arm and a sting, and in panic I thrust the stun gun forward and squeezed the trigger as hard as I could.

Nothing happened.

My belly turned into a block of ice. I sat immobile, the stun gun wavering before me as my thumb squeezed itself white on the trigger. Not even a tiny spark crackled between the electrodes. Damned cheap import. It had left me defenseless in the face of an enraged tiger. I wet my pants again.

Six retreated back onto the bed, his teeth bared threateningly and his eyes ablaze. His hand was upraised, each finger sprouting a claw that looked the size of a steak knife. For a long time neither of us moved, until finally Six relaxed and began to lick at the back of his hand. He kept his eyes on me the whole time and growled under his breath. It was an even longer time before I dared to move myself, and I slunk as hastily as I could from the room and yanked the door shut behind me. Only then did I notice that my left shirt

sleeve was gone entirely. On my forearm were six pale-red lines, from which here and there tiny droplets of blood oozed. I could hear the quiet rasp of the tiger grooming himself on the other side of the door.

The message had been delivered with crystal clarity. He could have taken my arm off; he just did not want to. I figured it was the closest I was going to get to gratitude from him. "Fine," I said shakily. "We'll do it your way."

Six got a treat that afternoon with his bowl of formula. I left a small chunk of steak on a plate next to the bowl, and heard him greedily devouring it before he lapped up the rest of his meal. A satisfied smile came to my face moments later as the bedsprings creaked and Six began to groan. The tablet that I had hidden in the meat had done its job. It still worried me that I had to tranquilize him, but it was better than losing body parts.

He was sprawled on his side when I ventured back into the room. Much to my relief he was still breathing. A little spot of drool darkened the sheet under his muzzle. I took a moment to gather my courage, and then crept closer. "Hey," I said. "Hey, you." Six groaned in reply, his eyes blinking, unfocused. I had brought a yardstick with me, which I used to poke him in the shoulder. He only groaned again, and did not move. It was a pitiful sight. "Sorry I had to do that to you," I said as I knelt on the floor beside the bed. With trepidation I reached for his muzzle and held his jaws open, and with my other hand pulled his tongue out to keep him from choking. He growled indignantly, and then closed his eyes.



At least I could get a look at his bandages, which were in sorry shape. Blood had seeped through the gauze that covered some of his larger wounds. A few of the smaller bandages were gone altogether, probably licked away. I was worried that he might have swallowed them, but after a quick search I found that they had fallen between the bed and the wall.

When I was finished changing his bandages I sat on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on his chest. It was warm and powerful, and twitched just slightly at my touch. The fact that I could not do this without tranquilizing him depressed me. It was a sad reminder that the creature that lay upon my bed was not human. Whatever his origin, whatever secrets he held, it was all out of my reach. I had wanted so much for him to be an intelligent creature, a wondrous being that I could talk to and learn from. Maybe that was why I had been so eager to take him home, despite the danger. As surely as he was unique, though, inside he was nothing more than a dumb animal.

I sighed, and for a while I sat and petted him. The fur was soft, like velvet, and the muscles underneath were hard and well-toned. I explored him for a while, moving down his arm to his hand with its curious extra finger, and then I brushed my fingers along his big round ears. So much like a man, yet

at the same time so much like a tiger. How could such a creature have come to be? Was he a construct? An alien? Something from the future? Or had he simply been there all along, unseen?

I stayed for a long time with my hand simply resting on his chest. Some of my disappointment with his savage nature faded with the feel of his fur against my skin. Though a brute, he was still no less a wonder. Gazing down at him filled me with pity. He had suffered so much and was very likely alone in the world, and despite his obvious strength he surely had to struggle every day against hunger and fear. It was not fair that such a magnificent creature had to lead what I imagined to be a miserable existence. Overcome for a moment, I leaned down and touched my nose to his, and whispered, "I won't let anything happen to you."

His eyes snapped open, and again I felt my innards turn to ice. I stood up quickly and backed away as his tongue drew back into his mouth and he began to growl. Marvel that he was, it was no excuse for me to forget that the pill I had slipped him had only a limited duration. Thankfully he was still groggy and could not focus his eyes. It was a sure bet that he would not be happy if I was still there when his senses returned, so keeping a wary eye on him I gathered up my medical supplies and retreated from the room.

Later that evening I heard Six moving about, exploring his surroundings, and decided that he was strong enough for solid food. That led to another quandary. There was no way to know exactly how close to a tiger Six was, and it worried me that he might require an ungodly amount of raw meat each day, which I could never afford. It seemed almost insulting to offer him cat food. I reasoned that as he did not seem to be starved when I found him, obviously he did not require that much meat, since he could never have found that much on his own in his environment. Then I thought of how strangely few drug dealers and homeless people could be found in the Badlands, and quickly put that thought out of my mind. Cat food it would be.

After another trip to the supermarket, with a detour to the hardware store where I had bought the stun gun to give the clerk a piece of my mind, I returned with four huge, heavy bags filled with canned cat food and several cheap cuts of meat. Six eyed me warily as I slunk into the room with a bowl of water and a tray of the smelly mush. "Sorry," I whispered to him. "It's all I can afford." I closed the door, and listened with satisfaction to the sounds he made while he devoured his meal.

The next morning I thought it would be best if I did not take the day off of work as I had planned to. There was little need for me to hover over my patient, and Six would probably appreciate being left alone for a while. It was hard to concentrate in the lab, though. Distracted, I kept spilling things, and broke three beakers before it was even lunch-time. My coworkers were concerned, of course, but I just waved my hand and said that I was exhausted after my bout of "fever." My mind, of course, was preoccupied with Six and the hundreds of questions surrounding him. More than anything, I could not keep my thoughts away from the soft warmth of his fur.

As soon as I returned from work it was time for Six to take his medicine again. His glare seemed somehow darker as I reached through the door to deliver his offering of meat. "What's wrong?" I said, worried that he had somehow made a connection between the meat and the terrible hangover that I imagined he suffered after the drug wore off. I waited impatiently outside the door, growing ever more concerned that he was wise to my trick, and was relieved when I heard him gulping down the treat. There was some scratching in the litter-pool, and then a creak of the bedsprings, and then silence. I waited several minutes and then slipped inside.

Six lay on his belly this time, eyes half open and glazed, staring at the wall. I had to roll his ponderous body over to reach his bandages. His head flopped to the side and his tongue fell from his mouth of its own accord. It was a relief to be spared the unsettling job of reaching between his teeth.

Many of his wounds bore healthy scabs, much to my satisfaction, although the bullet holes in his leg were still worrying. I changed his dressings, then raked through his litter-pool, which thank God he had learned to use without any urging. I pulled it closer to the bed so that he would not have to risk tearing his stitches to reach it, and then sat once again beside him and stroked his fur. I knew that I should not linger, not wanting to repeat the previous day's indiscretion, but I could not resist burying my hand in his pelt. It was as soft as I remember it and just as warm, and this time I fancied I could feel a subtle vibration under my fingers. I wanted to think it was a response to my touch, or maybe in his drugged stupor Six was simply dreaming pleasant feline dreams. Whatever the reason, I found it soothing, almost hypnotic. I realized that through that touch I had found a tenuous means, perhaps the only way, to commune with this wonderful creature. The feeling of his strength beneath my hand gave me a fleeting glimpse into his

world. It was a fellowship in which I could easily lose myself, and I hoped that somehow, deep in his savage thoughts, Six felt it, too.

The week settled into a routine. Six got a hearty breakfast of cat food in the morning before I left for work, then afterward, a tasty chunk of meat with its hidden tablet allowed me time to tend his wounds, and moreover to sit beside him. His injuries were healing at an impressive rate, giving me a greater understanding of how he had managed to survive in what must have been a very hostile world. As the days passed it was probably no longer necessary for me to treat him on a daily basis, but I could not bear to give up the peaceful communion. I knew that it was wrong to keep drugging him as I did for such a selfish need, but it had become almost an addiction for me. Every night as he lay safely in a daze I would sit by his side, my hands caressing his fur, marveling at his fierce beauty and pondering his impenetrable secrets. Each night I would leave behind an untainted piece of meat and some fresh tuna, little gifts for him that I thought might help to assuage my growing sense of guilt.

At the end of the second week I finally admitted to myself that Six no longer needed my treatment. I had taken the stitches from his leg and his other wounds were healing well. There would be no more tablets hidden in his evening meal. Now I was faced with the dilemma of what I was going to do with him. It seemed cruel to keep him in my room like a prisoner, but it seemed equally cruel to just release him where I had found him. I agonized over the question all evening long, and went to bed with a dreadful headache.

I awoke later from my uneasy sleep with a deep sense of dread. It was a sensation I had not felt since I was a little boy when I would awaken positive that I was not alone in my room. I was sweating and shivering, and was actually hesitant to reach for my glasses on the coffee table. My rational mind scoffed, reminding me that I was a scientist and that it was shameful to tremble in the dark like some frightened child.

My groping fingers encountered fur.

The room abruptly grew much colder.

I could not move a muscle. I do not even think my heart was beating. My mind reeled as the reality of the looming danger sunk in. Don't move, I told myself. *Stay perfectly still, or you're as good as dead.*

There was a sudden pressure on my chest. A hand, huge and warm and furry, was holding me down. I had seen a cat once pin a mouse the same way before ripping it to pieces. My breath escaped in a hoarse whimper, which caught in my throat as I felt the prick of claws against my skin. *Don't move.*

An hour went by, or perhaps just a minute. There was no sound in the room save for the thunder of the blood in my ears. The hand on my chest did not budge, not even a twitch, until the pressure abruptly lifted away. I panted but remained motionless, straining in the darkness for the slightest sound.

There was none. Time passed, and I managed to gather enough courage to fumble for my glasses. Peering into the darkness I could make out the familiar shapes of my furniture, but nothing threatening, no looming monstrosity waiting in the shadows, not even when I turned the light on. With shaking legs I stumbled to the bedroom and threw open the door.

The window stood open. Chilly air blew in through it and rustled the curtains. The bed stood empty. Even the sleeping bag was gone.

I shut the door slowly and felt tears burning behind my eyes. "You're welcome," I said in a choked whisper.

I told myself that it was for the better. After all, what was I supposed to have done with him? Six had survived for a long time on his own, and now that he had his health back, he no longer needed me to look after him. It was supposed to be a consoling thought, but it did not work. He was more than just another wounded animal that I had nursed back to health. He was a living mystery, one that I sorrowfully knew that I would never solve. I did not appreciate the true depth of that mystery, however, until the next evening, when I discovered that of the dozen cans of cat food that I had left in the kitchen, not one could be found. Later, as I set about the sad task of cleaning the bedroom, I was astonished to find hidden behind the bed a neat little collection of white tablets. There were fifteen of them, one for each night of Six's stay, their surfaces pockmarked and rough from the moisture in the meat in which they had been hidden.

I sat down on the bed and cried for a very long time.



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To this day I carry the stun gun with me. It still does not work, of course. I keep it as a memento. My coworkers find it odd but I don't care. Let them think what they will. They already think I'm crazy for insisting on driving once every week to a lonely, desolate neighborhood to leave a can of cat food in the doorway of an empty house.



Clouds blanket the sky.  
Snow covers the ground.  
The only WARMTH



...comes from the heart  
beating next to you.

Would you trade him for a ticket  
off this frozen hellhole?

"Most highly recommended."

—Elizabeth Barrette, author and  
reviewer for "Spicy Green Iguana"

"The authors really come together"

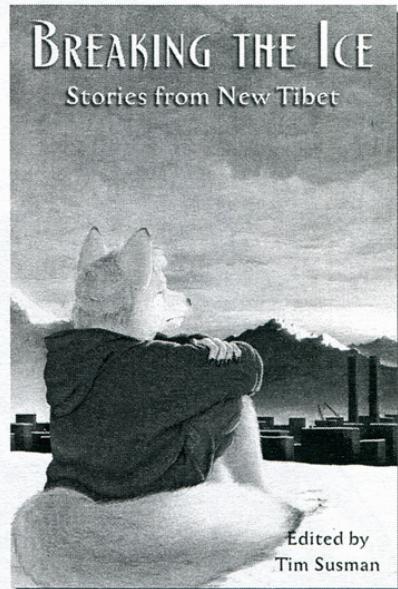
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Cover illustration by Odis Holcomb



# The Blade to Your Hand

**M.C.A. Hogarth**

M.C.A. Hogarth lives in stormy Florida on a plot of land owned by the neighborhood sandhill cranes. She spends days with databases and telecommunications equipment, and comes home to art sketchbooks and notebooks of poetry and fiction. Her writing has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Speculations* and *Pangaia*. You can read more about her work on her website ([www.stardancer.org](http://www.stardancer.org)).

Cheetah Steele is a Florida artist specializing in fantasy and anime. She has won numerous accolades for her anime work and received a "Best Black and White" honor at Necronomicon 98. Her websites are ([www.solluna.org/~cheetah](http://www.solluna.org/~cheetah)) [fantasy/furry] and ([www.silvertales.com](http://www.silvertales.com)) [anime].

The sullen sunlight lent a harsh brightness to the deck as a crowd of dark pirates stared at two figures in the middle of their circle. It was the kind of smudged day that followed a storm, and the choppy waters smacked against the hull constantly. A thin lion with hair pulled into a tight dark braid and wiry body clothed in patchwork leathers sat on a crate, stropping a dagger while listening.

"And here's the latest of our captain's progeny," Lexander said. The tiger-striped feline man grinned. "Donnik, picked up from shore on our last raid, along with that pretty cargo sitting belowdecks. Sixteen years ago, the captain visited his mum, and here he is. Thinks he can cut a pirate's life."

A rumble ran through the watchers. The lion knew without looking up that the song was laughter and derision both.

"And, as usual, no one joins our number unless he can best one of us in an unfair fight." Snickers then. "So, Donnik, choose one of your brothers. You win, you get to stay. You lose, we keelhaul you."

A long pause answered Lexander. The wind soughed in the sails, and the rigging creaked. Then, a hesitant voice said, "Him."

"Zalen? You want to fight Zalen?"

The lion glanced up, actually looked at the newest by-blow. Like all of the captain's get, he was a feline mix, plain-coated with a handful of spots here and there and only a determined desperation to harden his eyes and stiffen the adolescent gangling of his body.

"Yes," Donnik said. "He's pretty small."

Lexander barked a laugh. "What do you say, Zalen?"

The lion smiled wryly and sheathed her dagger. "Sure," she said, her alto rough enough to pass for a young man's. "I'm always good for a fight."

Lexander clapped the new boy's shoulder. "Good luck. You'll need it." Then he strode into the watching circle, still chortling.

A nervous Donnik waited as the lion padded into the center circle, throwing off her boots. She spread her arms, black claws sliding through the slits in her fingertips. "Ready."

Donnik leaned forward. "Ready," he said, ears flattening.

"Fight!" Lexander called, and they leaped.

One of Donnik's fists drove into the lion's midriff, striking muscle hard as wood and insulated by thick padding, the same padding that suggested the lion's masculine shape. "Ow!"

The lion grabbed his wrist and bent his arm backward, the cords on the back of her hand standing in sharp relief in the wet sunlight. As he whimpered, she kicked him in the groin.

Donnik fell to the sound of the pirate crew's jeers. The lion stood above him, waiting patiently for him to rise. It took him a while, but he dragged himself upright. He snarled at her, and she smiled without humor.

"Try again," she said.

Donnik rushed her, and this time she dodged and slammed an arm across his ribs, flipping him backward. The bandages on her body might be a falsehood, but her muscles were truth, built by hundreds of similar fights spent propagating the illusion other masculinity. Her father had captured her with the raid that had taken her mother, and her tomboy attitude and androgynous body had saved her then.

It still did. It had saved her from slavery, from rape and death. But not from the lies.

Mazalaen circled around to Donnik's head, staring at him as he sucked in air. Nothing saved her from lies... and the only thing between her and death was violence. She kicked him in the chest, grabbed his shirt and lifted him by it. The crew responded with a rash of cheers and laughter.

The lion punched him with enough force to crack the bridge of his nose, then dropped his body to the deck. Only half-conscious, Donnik curled into a ball. "Still raw, Lexander," she said.

Lexander shook his head, grinning. "Everyone's raw when you get your hands on them, Zalen. Guess we'll be tossing this one back overboard!" He strolled to the lion's side, watching the rest of the crew converge on Donnik. "Good job on him."

Mazalaen shrugged. "Father's seed's getting a bit weak."

"Don't let him catch you saying that," Lexander said, glancing at her with tilted brow. "Is the cargo awake yet?"

"Don't know."

"Maybe you should check. After dispatching him so well, you deserve a bit of fun."

She grinned lopsidedly "Thanks. I'll do that."

Lexander nodded, glanced at her again. "We're almost to the next town, big enough for more of us to head to shore. Then you can really work the fire out of your blood. I know how it gets."

"Yeah. You do." She grinned without humor, then walked aft. What she really wanted was a moment's privacy to change into fresh linens. She could only do that on land where the others were occupied with rape and pillage. If they caught her, particularly now that she could no longer pass for male without binding her body, she wouldn't live more than a few hours.

Belowdecks the harsh sunlight barely leaked in. Mazalaen lit a lantern and slid silently through the hold to check on the cargo. She crouched across from the bound bodies, setting the lantern on a crate.

Her mother had told her, when she'd been bound here twelve years ago, that her father had not always taken prisoners so. That he'd used his women and then left them. But the sale of such women to slavers or back to their families for the appropriate price had become too lucrative. Thus the vulpine noblewoman, her green dress torn and sullied, tossed in the middle of the sacks of meal with a few other servants. The rope gag that forced her mouth open left cracks of dried blood around the edges other muzzle.

She was, Mazalaen saw, awake.

"My sorrow," the lion said. "Your life will be one of suffering."

The fox woman's eyes widened. The lion saw fear in them, and the veil of tears that hid the higher spirit. Mazalaen had not cried since her mother had been sold. Tears were a threat to the lies. If she'd wanted her brothers to believe her, she'd had to believe herself. She'd had to kill without mercy, without regret. To become a marauder, a despoiler, a murderer, a thief. Mazalaen stepped toward the fox woman, crouched beside her, touched her chin. The noblewoman expected to be raped, to be hurt. That the lion could see clearly past her tears.

"You don't understand," Mazalaen murmured. "If I were merciful, I'd kill you now to spare you." Her fingers strayed to one of many daggers on her body. The one against the base of her spine, the dangerous, flexible one she'd had off the body of a soldier after ripping his throat out with her claws.

The blade slid free of the sheath with a thin hiss, and Mazalaen held it near the fox woman's throat. Her mother's cries echoed in her ears, faint as the sea in a conch shell. She tried to imagine weeping for the fox woman. Tears like rain onto dry soil, tears cleaner than the salt seas. Tears as endless as the ones running, loud as screams, from the fox woman's blue eyes.

"Do you want to live?" Mazalaen thought to ask.

The noblewoman stared at her, then nodded frantically.

"Some lives are little better than death," the lion said, but she slid the dagger into its sheath. The moment had broken. The lies had saved her, but they had also shackled her.

Mazalaen sat on the crate and sharpened her knives until she'd judged she'd been in the hold long enough to have raped the fox woman. Then she went on-deck and up to the crow's nest. The loneliness of lookout duty suited her. Seventeen brothers, one father and twenty crew: it would take only one to unmask her. The strain of it had become so habitual she hardly noticed how it stole her sleep, her appetite.

The lion rested her hands on the edge of the basket and stared across the harsh waters. The fringed coast of Zalitraeq was still distant, but it was the best patrolled coast in the west... and also the richest, its towns populated with complacent merchants and healthy highborn women. She tried to imagine such a life, a life of safety and privilege. It seemed as unlikely as

real laughter, as freedom. Every life was a cage. It was only the bars that differed.

Mazalaen trained hard, dark eyes on the horizon, keeping vigil against every threat.



The Imazae ki Qethrynn Onchatraka stood outside, squinting. Thordan the Grey, captain of the palace guard, knelt before her, and the sun reflecting off the bright metal of his armor's back made her eyes water. She wished fleetingly for a blanket to drape over him. "So you're certain this town will be the one?"

"It seems likely, my Lady. If not, we can easily catch up to them, riding. These towns are linked by the Queen's Road."

Qethrynn nodded, casting her gaze out at the town of Selimaeth. The mud around the town had hardly dried from the storm they'd ridden through to reach it, but the road had remained mercifully easy on the horse's hooves. The first Queen of Zalitraq, foreign-born, had missed her home terribly. The King had so loved her that he'd built a road all the way around the coast of the kingdom so she could ride in safety, pacing the sea. Qethrynn glanced at the wolf's down-turned face. "So there's nothing to do then, but wait."

"Yes, Lady. It's typical for them to draw within firing range, bombard the town with flaming pitch, then come in while everyone's distracted and begin their pillage."

"Is there any way at all we can prevent the fire?" Qethrynn said. "I mislike the idea of allowing any harm at all to come to the people here. We came to help them, after all."

"Begging your pardon, Lady — we came to stop the pirates. If we lose a few buildings in the process, I think we can call it a fair trade. This ship has been responsible for years of raids."

"Mmm," Qethrynn said. "Very well then. Keep me informed of their approach."

"Yes, Lady"

Qethrynn watched him stand, bow and stride off, helmet in hand. She shook her head. The palace guard was still too polite to her, and no doubt would continue to be until they actually saw her use her martial training. She did

not begrudge them their attitude, but their continual courtesy made her feel like they were accommodating a spoiled princess who wanted to play at war.

She was not a spoiled princess. She was the heir to the Zalitraq throne, chosen by dragons, the Untouched dream-walker, and she wasn't interested in playing at war. One day, Zalitraq would be her responsibility, and the safety of the country's people her own. How would she ever be able to ensure that security without practice?

Qethryn padded back to her tent, unhooking her cloak and sitting on her pallet. At least she'd been able to convince her parents to let her lead the ambush, though indubitably they'd told the captain to take over if the mission became perilous. The cheetah rolled onto her back and lay in silence, staring at the cloth ceiling. Someone had left a stick of frankincense lit for her, and she closed her eyes. Her stomach had knotted, but the faint bum up her throat didn't feel like fear to her. It felt like anticipation.



They'd drawn close enough to see the curl of smoke from the chimneys. In the violet dark of the evening, the lights had been doused on the ship as they crept near the shore, searching for the best place to put down anchor.

Mazalaen helped prepare the boats, then retired to the straw pallet in the hold she claimed as her own to wait for true night to fall. She stropped her blades, one by one. They were her only real possessions. Knives thin and deadly; sword straight and chipped. Stilettos hidden against her arms and daggers against her hips. She caressed the tempered metal, stronger and more flexible than anything else she owned, ran her fingers along its edge and let it bite her flesh. A slit of blood opened along her fingers, and she closed her eyes.

The lion had always been a blade. She had killed, had left violence in her wake for no reason better than to stay alive. What would it be like, to be wielded, as her daggers were? To feel a hand on her, stronger than she was strong, surer than she was sure... moral, where she was not?

Mazalaen glanced toward the shore, to the yellow lights burning in the windows. A powerful desire suffocated her, and her mouth gaped open. She panted. To be used well — to be held in righteous hands — if her life was a

lie, maybe that would make truth of it again. She felt, without knowing why, that the shore would save her soul.

After the sun had failed completely, Mazalaen joined the others crowding into the rowboats. They sailed through the darkness to the shore, leaving the ship manned by a skeleton crew. The drip of water off the oars rushed through the lion's ears with the sound of her pounding pulse.

To be used well. For her hardness to serve another with a gentler heart.



"My Lady, arise! The pirates are on-shore!"

Qethryn leaped up, unruly hair spilling over her slim shoulders. "Captain!"

Thordan stood at the flap of her tent, sword already bared. "They sneaked in... as cowards would! They didn't set fire to the town!"

"Perhaps they found out we were waiting," Qethryn said, rolling from her pallet. She'd slept badly, still dressed in her armor padding. Fragments of uncomfortable dreams fell from her as she stood. "I presume they used some sort of boat to row to shore. Find it and cut them off from their retreat."

"Aye, Lady. We'll take care of it."

"Indeed. I will see to the pirates." She drew on her leather skirt.

"Lady! Are you sure that's wise?"

"I gave you an order, Captain," Qethryn said coolly "See to it!"

"Aye, Imazae Ki."

Qethryn growled as soon as the captain had vanished. She pulled on her boiled leather breast piece and laced it on, then donned her belt and drew her sword. Thus accoutered, the princess of Zalitraq left her tent to collect the remaining soldiers and head for town.

A thread of gray smoke rose off the thatch roof of the nearest house. Another cottage further into town burst into flames. Townspeople ran screaming from their houses, towing babies and sacks. Into this confusion went the princess, followed by half her company. They scattered, each pursuing a shadowed figure as it darted away from their armored brightness.

A scruffy man menaced another with a sack, and Qethryn charged. He drew a painted long sword and parried her first blow while the frightened commoner fled. Her training stood her in good stead, though the man was

less interested in honorable forms than in trying to hamstring her. As she pushed him away, another joined him, and she backed away to keep them both in sight. Her first opponent had drawn a weapon breaker; her second was armed with a cutlass and a parrying dagger. She had her one sword.

"Well, well, if it isn't a woman with a blade!" the second said. "Somethin' new every day."

Qethryn bared her teeth. The scent of soot and burning flesh seared her nostrils.

The first man leered and leaped toward her, and she ducked the weapon breaker to engage his sword. The second, instead of waiting, lunged for her side. She snarled as his cutlass thunked against the seam other armor.

They had two free hands left. She had none. Qethryn spit into the face of the first man as he brought his second weapon up and used it to twist her wrists. Her sword flew from her grasp.

The second man suddenly crumpled. Qethryn jumped away, startled, staring at the dagger in the man's throat. She twisted wildly to look behind and saw a lone figure, clad in black — wide eyes, dark as a new wound, as stunned as the princess's own.

Qethryn turned to find the first man stepping toward her unexpected benefactor. She kicked him in the side, followed him to the ground and knocked him soundly on the head with his own weapon breaker. But by the time she'd turned, the stranger was gone. Frowning, the princess looked around for her sword and found it on the ground nearby. She lifted it, thin brows still drawn toward her nose. The cheetah ran her fingers along its edge, her wrists still aching from the exchange. She shook herself and sought the others.

Members of the guard in silver armor jogged hither and yon. Qethryn caught one of them by the arm. "I need a status, soldier."

"The captain has cut off their retreat. We have twelve men in custody, Lady, and another dead. We have routed them!"

"Good. I dropped one in the square. Send someone to tie him up and put him with the others. What about the fire?"

"The fire?" he looked confused.

Qethryn pointed at the town. "The fire, man! Is anyone organizing a brigade?"

"N-n-no..."

"Well, do so, or there won't be a town left!"

"Aye, Lady!"

Qethryn shook her head, frustrated, and made a circle around the town, searching for any other pirates. She found none.

The Imazae Ki later rendezvoused with Thordan the Grey. He'd sent his contingent to the ship using the ship's own rowboats and succeeded in capturing the vessel and liberating one noblewoman and her household servants. With the help of the guards, the townspeople had succeeded in extinguishing the fires and returned, more or less unharmed, to their beds. And in her possession Qethryn now had thirty-five prisoners and two bodies to bring home to her father and mother, plus one large bruise above her left mid-rib.

It did not slake her — did not quench the sense of anticipation. She had not ridden so far for this... had she?

Qethryn joined the captain in his review of the pirates, finding among them the man she'd knocked unconscious. She ignored him and crouched beside one of the dead bodies, looking at the knife neatly lodged in its throat. She drew the blade from its sheath of flesh, releasing a gout of sticky blood.

"Impressive," Thordan said, then continued, "What do you want to do with the ship, Lady?"

She'd been distracted by the blood, by the knife, by the memory of the figure. Qethryn shook herself and pushed a strand of copper hair behind her ear, streaking it darker. "I shall ride back to the capital with half the guard and some of these prisoners, and send back to you enough men to crew the ship and sail her to port. Do you suppose she could be inducted into the merchant fleet?"

"Or even the naval, given enough time in dry-dock. That would be round irony."

Qethryn smiled absently. She was tired, her ribs hurt, and the fight had been less glamorous, less engaging than she'd hoped. Instead of the high of battle-glory described in ballads, she'd barely fought, exchanged blows with two men, and even now was excluded from the camaraderie of the men. She could see them out of the corner of her eye, gathering around a fire and drinking ale donated by the town. "Then let it be so, Captain."

He smiled at her — the polite smile of a servant. "It was well done, Lady."

"I suppose," Qethryn said, then reached out and gripped the wolfs shoulder, squeezed. "Thank you for your hard work, Captain."

"My job, Lady Good night."

"Good night."

Qethryn returned to her tent and found a fresh jug of water waiting beside the small bath basket. A bath first — then she would try to sleep. She blessed the silent servant who'd left her the water. Half an hour later, the cheetah pushed the used basin outside her tent, lit the incense and curled up on her palette, waiting for something she could not name.



The woman, the one with the hair brighter than fire, too slender for her armor, too beautiful for her sword... Mazalaen couldn't watch the pirates cut the cheetah down. She hadn't even planned to kill Nekor before her knife had left her hand. Afterwards she'd run to the trees by the shore, terrified. The scrape of her breath in her throat, the rush of her blood; it was as if her body had awoken, as if the bars around her heart had loosened enough for her to see, to truly see what she'd become. The light of the woman had been enough to expose her soul, and the sight of it had been too much for Mazalaen. She'd curled into a ball and the echoes of her mother's screams had clogged her ears while dreams of hot tears she couldn't shed robbed her of vision and sanity.

The battle had continued in her absence, and she'd found it mostly done by the time she'd risen from her fugue. Still shivering, the lion crept from the brush and around town, dipping into shadows and sliding around buildings until she'd circled to the back of the soldier's camp. Still scalded by the vision during the fight, she somehow wanted more. Better to die burnt clean than to live forever in the twilight of a pirate's life.

One guard patrolled the area around a nondescript tent near the back, and another tried admirably to look as if he wasn't guarding the door-flap. Their affected nonchalance gave away their mistress's position and impaired their vigilance. Mazalaen slid through the dark, every hair on end. A life spent in fear and near-paranoia had equipped her for stealth far better than the cozy life of the palace guards had prepared them for this duty.

The lion slit the corner of the tent far enough to work her way inside —

— and into another world.

Gray smoke twirled in languorous sensual patterns, weighing the air with the heavy fragrance of spices and resin. On a table beside a pallet, a dim candle lent a glow to the face of the dozing cheetah, eyelashes casting shadows over her pale cheeks. Her ornate silver and blue robe swaddled her like a blanket, but left bare a hip and a breast clad in a gossamer night shift thin as dreams. In the warmth and the intimate dark, Mazalaen thought suddenly that she'd made a mistake.

The whisper of her tufted tail against the fabric of the tent wall sounded too loud in the silence, and the woman on the bed blinked, opened her eyes. Then sat up. "You."

Mazalaen froze.

"The man. With the knife. The one who saved me;" Qethrynn slid off the bed. "It is you, isn't it?"

The lion swallowed, then nodded.

"I owe you my life," she said, and paused. She cocked her head, and red curls crimped around her face. "What are you doing here?"

Mazalaen opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Qethrynn's eyes drifted down, widened. "Are you wounded?" Her slender fingers rose to her mouth. "Oh, your entire midriff..."

Her breastplate had come undone at the edges. Mazalaen glanced down and found it gaping across her side, exposing the thick layer of cloth swathing her from hip to chest. She grimaced.

A frown creased the cheetah's brow. She took the candle and brought it closer. "You should see a healer about this. I can send you to my own. It's the least I can do..." Her hand drifted across the bandages. "They seem dry. Do they need changing? There's... no blood." Qethrynn stopped. The frown became more pronounced. Her fingers curled around the edge of one of the bandages and slowly tugged at it until it slid down.

Mazalaen's breath caught in her throat. She thought the light would blind her. She couldn't watch as the cheetah loosened the bandages until she could see the line of her true waist. Warm fingers slid beneath the bandage to rest on her belly, below her navel, then traveled up to her face.

Qethrynn reached past the lion's ears and tugged at the pins until the hard braid unraveled and a cascade of dark curls fell over Mazalaen's shoulders. Then the cheetah stepped back and looked at her, calmly, intently. Waiting.

The lion saw her standing with the pride of a soldier and the bearing of a lord, her delicate fingers curled as if to hold a sword.

"Use me, Lady," Mazalaen whispered.

"I don't understand," Qethryn said, looking into her eyes.

The shadow rising from the back of the tent had a familiar shape, and Mazalaen pulled Qethryn to her chest and threw the knife she'd forgotten in her hand. Her father ducked fast enough to catch it in the shoulder instead of the chest.

"What in... Zalen!"

"Zalen?" Qethryn whispered.

"Stay away. I have more of them, you know it."

"What are you talking about! Don't you know who you're holdin' there? That's the heir to the throne! The Imazae Ki herself! Let's get her out of here before they notice the ruckus. You and me and Lexander will live forever rich on the money we can get from selling her back to the bleedin' royalty. If we can find Lexander."

"It's over," Mazalaen said. She could feel the cheetah shaking, or perhaps it was her own body. The heir to Zalitraq's throne? "We've lost, Father. We lost the day we were born."

"What's gotten into you?" Her father glanced at the knife, pulled it out of his shoulder with a grunt. "And what the hells was this about? Now's not the time for a quarrel, boy."

"Leave now, or the next one takes your throat, like it did Nekor's."

"You... killed Nekor?"

"And I'll kill you if you don't leave."

He stepped forward, eyes narrowed. "You know, if I didn't know you better..." He stopped abruptly, drew back. She could see his eyes on the curve of one breast, just visible. Then his face darkened. "No."

"You never looked," Mazalaen said with a faint smile.

"I'll kill you later. Right now I'm more interested in that princess. Hand her over — "

Mazalaen flung her third knife into the cleft where his collarbones met. He dropped to his knees, gurgling. She stared at him as he died, and a small gasp choked her throat. Something hot lined her eyes, blurring her vision. In

her arms, the head pressed to her chest seemed to burn through the leather to touch the organ beating there, and the bars around it burst. Mazalaen wept.

The guards erupted into the royal tent, cursing and flailing. They tore her from the cheetah as Thordan strode in, tail waving in agitation. Yet another guard checked her father's dying body.

"Imazae Ki! Did either of these two pirates hurt you?"

"N-no, Captain," Qethryn said, drawing herself slowly to her feet. "What is this about pirates?"

"He's their captain," the wolf said, pointing at the body. "And this one was another member. He didn't hurt you? Are you certain? In any way?"

Thordan's piercing stare irritated Qethryn. "I said I was fine. Now let go of her and take the body away."

"Let go of him!"

"Her, Captain. And yes, you heard me. Let go other. She just saved my life — again."

"Again?" The captain looked uncertainly at Mazalaen, blinked at the curls and the flared hips. "Gods, it is a woman!"

"Let her go," Qethryn said directly to the guards, who looked from their liegelady to their captain.

"What are you going to do with her?" Thordan asked. "Imazae Ki, she's one of their allies. Any woman who travels with pirates and remains alive is suspect. Pirates don't travel with women!"

"I suppose they don't," Qethryn said quietly, still looking at the lion. Mazalaen blushed. Turning back to the captain, Qethryn said, "I won't say it again."

Thordan sighed. "Release her." Freed of the guards, Mazalaen went to a knee in front of the princess and bowed until she could no longer see past her own mane. Her large hands spread over the rug on the ground.

"Does she honestly believe you'll succor her?" the captain asked, incredulous.

"Be quiet," Qethryn said curtly, then reached down, touching the lion's head with her fingers.

"My service, Lady. Accept it, I beg you," Mazalaen said, almost too softly to be heard.





Unable to name her fascination, convinced that the other woman shared it somehow, Qethryn asked, "Why?"

The vision of them both, darkness to bright, sword to wielder, liege to lady, clouded the lion's eyes and they watered again. Joy this time, and need.

"I don't know," Mazalaen answered. "All I know is this. This now. This forever."

The silence that followed was as that that followed a prayer. Mazalaen pulled the knife from the sheath on her back and offered it to the cheetah without lifting her head. She felt it leave her palm, felt another replace it. Her fingers slid it into the sheath, learning briefly the gems encrusted on it. A shiver ran through her, and with it a red flush to color her cheeks and the insides of her ears. She raised her head.

"You didn't," Thordan said. "You didn't make her yours. Your parents will be displeased — "

"My parents will discover that their daughter will make her own decisions and take her own path, as her spirit dictates." Qethryn shook back her copper curls. "You may go now, captain. And take your entourage with you. The crowd offends me."

The captain studied her, the faint puzzlement on his face punctuated by the beginnings of respect. He turned and pointed his people out, following them.

Qethryn slid to the ground beside the lion and took her hands. "Please, don't weep."

Mazalaen shook her head. "No, Lady. It's good, it's good."

"I don't understand," Qethryn said. Her ears sagged and she smiled, gentle, wry. Such softness of expression the lion had never been privileged to see in all her life. "There are many things I don't understand. Except that I want you near me. I won't let them take you away."

The lion pulled the slim fingers to her lips and kissed them. "Please the gods, no."

Qethryn swallowed, a warm shiver running down her spine. She glanced at the blood soaked into the floor. "That was your father?"

Mazalaen nodded.

"It must have been hard..."

"No," Mazalaen said. "No, it was not. It was a relief. It was my freedom." She drew in a long breath. "Thank you."

"No, I should thank you. You saved me twice." Qethryn's ears flattened. "And the captain's abuse of you was unwarranted. I will have him apologize later, when you've been fully instated."

"That was abuse?" Mazalaen chuckled, a mid-place between amusement and tears. "I think I will like where we're going."

"I think so too." Qethryn's ears flicked backward, and the silence that came between them then had nothing of discomfort. Indeed, Qethryn finally felt sleepy — truly so — and realized the sense of waiting she'd been feeling had dissipated. She glanced up at the lion. "I don't even know your name."

"Mazalaen," the lion said softly, and her shiver was obvious to them both. "And you are Qethryn Onchatraka, the Imazae Ki, heir to Zalitraq throne."

"Yes." Qethryn drew in a breath. "You will come, won't you? To the palace? To be mine. My first above all. Keeper of my safety."

"Your surety. Your faithful. The blade to your hand," the lion said.

Qethryn lifted her head, solemn, waiting.

"Nothing will please me more," Mazalaen replied. Her dark eyes were clear as rain-washed night.



# Spirit Dance

**Douglas Smith**

A finalist on the 2001 Hugo ballot for the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, Douglas Smith's stories have appeared in professional magazines and anthologies in eight countries and six languages. "Spirit Dance" first appeared in the Canadian anthology *Tesseracts 6* in 1997, and was reprinted in The Third Alternative (UK) in 1999.

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Vera made a warding sign as I entered the store, my hound Gelert trailing behind. She pretended to wipe her hands on her faded blue apron, but I caught the dance other fingers.

"Hello, Vera. It's been a while," I said.

"Uh, yes, yes it has, Mr. Blaidd," she said quickly, not returning my smile. Turning from where she'd been refilling a food bin, she addressed her husband. "I gotta check something in the back, Ed." Almost running, she dipped behind the long wooden counter and into the storeroom.

Edward Two Rivers leaned on the counter beside the cash register, a newspaper spread in front of him, his long grey hair spilling onto the pages. He watched her leave then smiled at me.

"Ouch," I said.

"You still spook her," he chuckled.

"Are you going to run and hide too?" I asked, grinning.

The black eyes narrowed but his smile remained. "Vera's a white woman. My people have told legends of the Herok'a for generations, Grey Legs. I

grew up with those stories. I've known others of your kind... and I think I still know you, even if it's been... what?"

"Four years," I said.

"Four years since you left Wawa." He took my offered hand in a strong grip.

"Good to see you, Ed," I said.

"You too, Gwyn." Leaning over the counter, he patted Gelert's huge head. "And good to see you as well, you great beast." Gelert's tail wagged furiously, threatening a display of pop cans. Ed looked back to me. "Did you fly in?"

I nodded. "I landed on Deer's Pond, set up camp on the north shore, then we hiked in. Get my fax?"

"Yeah. I made you up some supplies and a map to the truck driver's cabin." He nodded toward a small pile of brown paper packages in the corner, wrapped in twine.

"Thanks. What do I owe you?"

"I'll run a tab. You'll be here a while. Not the best homecoming for you, I guess."

"Could be better. Any word of Robert?"

Ed nodded. "I showed your friend's picture around. He was definitely here in Wawa for the funerals, but kept to himself pretty much. Found someone who talked to him, though. She said he left town about two days ago, but he'd be back. Something about unfinished business here."

"Any idea where he went?"

"Just a guess, but I'd say the Muskokas."

"Why?" I asked frowning. The Muskokas were a cottage and resort district a two-hour drive north of Toronto, and a good 700 kilometers from Wawa.

He held up a finger for an answer and started flipping through the newspaper. Gelert curled beside our supplies. I waited, sifting through the smells of grains and fruit, wood and burlap, and humans. Vera was muttering in the storeroom at the back. I could have made out her words if I had wanted to, but I didn't.

Ed began reading. "Local logging baron Jonathan Conrad and his bodyguard were found dead early yesterday morning, outside his lodge in the Muskokas."

Footsteps outside announced a customer to me before the bell over the door brought Ed's head up from the paper. She looked early twenties, slim with grey green eyes and long dark hair that wasn't sure where it wanted to rest. Flashing a quick smile at Ed, she moved to the shelves of canned goods.

"Morning, Leiddia," Ed said, eyebrows shooting up.

"Morning, Ed," she replied, then looked at me. A familiar aura tinged her outline. She kept looking as I turned back to Ed.

Ed continued reading. "Conrad's wife had gone into town for the evening. She found the bodies about two yesterday morning."

"How'd he die?" I asked.

The woman Ed called Leiddia turned toward Ed, but I could feel her eyes still on me. I didn't look at her.

"They're bringing the coroner up from Toronto. The provincial cops figure some kind of animal attack, judging from the wounds. They say it was big whatever it was." Ed looked up at me. "Maybe a bear."

I swore silently. "Guess the environmentalists won't grieve much."

"The parents of those three boys won't," Leiddia said, stepping closer to the counter. "He killed them, even if he didn't drive the truck. Everybody knows he gave the order."

"Got off though," sighed Ed. "So'd the truck, driver. Accident, they said. Bad brakes. Conrad got a \$500 fine for not maintaining his trucks."

I had heard about the truck incident three days ago. Conrad had been chairman for a company which owned the paper mill outside Wawa and several logging operations north of Lake Superior. Recently, the company had faced escalating pressure from local residents, native bands and environmental groups. Protests centered on the company's clear cutting methods and general contempt for the old growth forest. The confrontation climaxed when a group of students and other protesters blockaded the road leading to the current clear cutting target.

The first truck to reach the blockade had backed off, driving fifteen miles back to camp in reverse. Two hours later, the next truck arrived. This one hadn't stopped.

The kids hadn't used logs or fallen trees to block the road. They hadn't piled boulders, or sprinkled the road with tire punctures. They had just stood across it, arms linked, singing.

The truck slammed into them, killing three local students. A female protestor from out-of-town also died.

"Five hundred dollars," said Ed, shaking his head.

"I went to college with one of them," Leiddia said quietly.

I looked at her, confirming my first impression of the familiar aura. "Were you there?"

She shook her head. "My stepfather works in the mill. He wouldn't let me go." She stared at me hard.

Ed cleared his throat. "Uh, Grey Legs, this is Leiddia Barker. Leiddia, this is an old friend, Gwyn Blaidd. Gwyn's the friend of Mr. Areas I mentioned."

"You know Robert?" she asked.

The door to the store opened before I could reply. A man stood with one foot in the store, hand still on the door. "Leiddia!" he barked, "Hurry up!"

She didn't look at him. "I'm coming," she snapped, thumping some cans on the counter.

As Ed rang up the order, I looked the man over. Late forties, maybe six feet, a paunch and thinning black hair slicked back. Gelert growled at him, and I didn't stop him. I didn't like his smell.

Leiddia paid Ed, took the bag of groceries, and turned to the door. Not waiting for her, the man let the door slam, walked to a beat-up Cutlass parked in front and got in. He had never even looked my way. As Leiddia shifted the bag to her other arm, I stepped past her and opened the door.

"Thanks," she said, stepping through. Hesitating, she looked at the car, then back at me. "Blaidd. That's a strange name."

"It's Welsh."

"Why does Ed call you Grey Legs?"

The car's horn blared. Jumping out of the car, he moved quickly toward us, fists clenched. "Damn it! What're you doing?" he snarled at her, then spun to face me. "Who the hell are you, mister? I..." His voice trailed off.

"Hello, Tom," I said. "Long time."

He swallowed hard. "Gwyn! I didn't know you were back."

I smiled. "I didn't figure our past relationship called for a postcard."

"Uh, yeah, right. Uh, Leiddia, don't be too long. I gotta get to work." He turned and got back in the Olds, with a glance over his shoulder.

She raised an eyebrow, staring after him. "Never seen anything affect old Tommy like that." She looked me up and down. "Will I see you again?"

"I'm camping by Deer's Pond. North shore," I said.

Smiling a cat-with-the-canary smile, she strolled casually to the car and got in. They drove off and I went back inside.

"So what do you think of our Leiddia?" Ed asked.

"I think I just passed some kind of test. She's the one who talked to Robert?"

"Yeah. I said an old friend of his was coming into town and wanted to surprise him. That's when she told me about him leaving." He looked puzzled. "Weird her showing up just as you arrive. She's not in town much. You gonna go see her?"

"I think she'll find me. How does Tom Barker come to be her stepfather?"

Ed grimaced. "She and her mom moved here about two years ago. The mother had some money and a good property, which got Tom interested. I don't know what she saw in him."

"He's still the same?"

"Grade-A asshole? Yeah, plus there's been some incidents with him and her mother. Cops at the house, but she's never laid any charges."

"Physical abuse?"

He nodded. "Vera knows the night nurse at Mercy. The mother's been in a few times, always with a story about some accident around the home. The nurse said it looked more like beatings." Ed looked grim, then thoughtful. "Far as I know, he leaves the girl alone."

"From what I saw," I said, picking up my supplies and moving to the door, "pushing Leiddia too far would be very inadvisable. He might wake something."

Ed's eyes narrowed. "What'd you see in her?"

"She has the Mark," I said quietly. Opening the door, I stepped out into the street after Gelert, not waiting for Ed's reply.

★ ★ ★

The first frost had come to Wawa early. Gelert and I hiked back through fall colors, crisp air, and no mosquitoes, reaching our campsite overlooking

Deer's Pond just before sunset.

That night, spirits of the firelight danced around me through the trees as the rising moon silvered the smooth surface of the water. With Gelert snoring softly beside me, other spirits danced through my thoughts.

I didn't want them to dance. I didn't want them to even exist. But spirits have their own views on these matters, and are very persistent when they feel it's time for a performance. These ghosts went back fifteen years. The prompting for tonight's tango was much more recent.

Dance, spirits.

Three days before, I had been many miles north. That day, I had stood by the heavy wooden railing of the broad stone promenade running the length of Cil y Blaidd, watching a small sea plane shatter the glass of the lake below. Part carved, part hung from a rocky slope of forest, Cil y Blaidd is a sprawling wood and stone structure overlooking a lake in far northern Ontario. The name is Welsh, for Wolfs Lair.

Built to my design years ago as an occasional retreat from civilization, recently it had become my permanent home. Or perhaps it was my act of retreat which had become permanent.

Accessible only by sea plane, Cil y Blaidd is invisible from the air. Those who had built it had been flown in at night, stayed until completion, and then were flown out again at night. I had piloted the plane.

Only three other people knew its location. As I watched the plane taxi to shore, I wondered which of the three it carried.

The plane pulled up to a long dock hidden from above by arching willow branches. A huge male figure emerged and strode along the dock to stone steps carved from the cliff face.

Well, it's not Estelle, I thought, ignoring the resentment this brought even after fifteen years. Too far to see if it was Robert or Michel. My visitor looked up, searching the slope as he climbed. Our eyes met and he raised a meaty hand to remove and wave a cloth cap, revealing a mass of red curls.

"Lo, Mitch," I called down as I waved back, wondering briefly at my feeling of relief. Turning from the railing, I headed through the house to greet Michel Ducharmes, the Red Bull, and current head of the Circle of the Herok'a.

Opening huge oaken front doors, I stepped out onto a graveled path as he emerged from the woods trailed by two great stags, their antlers barely

missing trees on either side. As Mitch shoved out a hand to me, the stags turned to the forest, lowering their heads toward trailing grey shadows.

"A fitting honor guard," I commented. "They felt I needed protection from your troops," he replied, jerking a thumb at six timber wolves hovering at the tree edge.

"Garm, Fenrir, take off. He's a friend," I said, addressing the two largest wolves. They glanced briefly at Mitch, then all six padded into the forest.

Inside, he settled his bulk into an oversized chair, taking the proffered Scotch. "You know this lake doesn't show on any map?" he said, downing the drink, "Not even those the Ministry of the Environment makes from satellite photos."

"Maybe the MOE needs better computers," I offered.

He glanced to where my array of computers and modems resided. "Or better security on the systems they do have."

I shrugged, not rising to the bait. Silence. He cleared his throat, staring out at the lake. "Speaking of security..."

"I hope you didn't fly up here to pitch that at me again," I interrupted. "I'm out. No more. You've plenty of predator class to recruit for your dirty little jobs."

He reddened.

"Besides," I continued, "Robbie runs security in the Circle. I doubt he'd be thrilled about this."

He said nothing, fixing me with the hot angry stare of the challenged bull. When he finally spoke, his voice was level. "Two years ago, Robert became active with an environmental protest group."

"So what? Lots of us are activists. It goes with the territory. I got Stelle into it. We used to try to recruit Robbie."

"Seen Robert lately?" he asked, too casually.

I snorted. "Mitch, I haven't talked to him or Stelle in eight years. What're you driving at? Is this about Robbie?"

He sighed and nodded, suddenly looking very old. I had never thought of him as old before.

"Gwyn," he said quietly, "Our Robert has threatened to kill two men. One is an important man, the type who attracts attention." He'd been looking at the empty glass in his hand. Now he looked up at me. "I need your help, Gwyn. To find Robbie first."

I shut up then and listened as Mitch told of the logging protests, the blockade, the protestors' deaths, and of Robbie's threat to kill Conrad and the truck driver. He talked and pleaded, pleaded and talked.

Finally, he paused. "There's something else," he said, staring out at the lake. "CSIS knows of this. According to our mole, somebody in CSIS is leaking intelligence on the Herok'a to an outside party." He looked back to me. "Gwyn, we think someone's resurrected the Tainchel."

Involuntarily, I bared my teeth. Damn it. I questioned him on his source, what evidence he had, how recent was the tip, but he knew he had me. Finally I'd agreed, because of the Tainchel angle, and because Robbie had been a friend and Mitch still was. That's what I'd told myself at the time. Now, watching the spirits dance in the firelight, I knew I'd done it for someone else.

Dance, spirits, dance.

Estelle and I had been an item for quite a while, back when I ran security in the northeast. For centuries, the Herok'a were nothing more than creatures of legend. Security had mostly amounted to making sure things stayed that way. Then came the Tainchel, a covert operation of the federal intelligence agency CSIS, formed as we later learned, with the single goal of tracking down and capturing the Herok'a. For scientific purposes.

Tainchel. Old Scottish term. Tainchel: Armed men advancing in a line through a forest to flush out and kill wolves.

We lost quite a few before we caught on. They'd developed specialized scanners from tests on early victims. Subtle differences in alpha wave patterns, infrared readings, and metabolic rates gave us away, even in crowded cities.

Then they got careless and we became aware. I leaked word about a meeting that the Circle of the Herok'a planned for an isolated spot. At the next full moon, of course. I figured they'd expect that.

Twenty of the Tainchel walked into the ambush, armed mostly with tranquilizer rifles. They didn't walk out. They'd encountered the Herok'a before, but never predators. Wolves, bears, the big cats, birds of prey. We didn't take prisoners.

After, we contacted Justice and CSIS. I sent a list of the remaining Tainchel agents, present locations, recent activities, and a note saying, "We

know who you are. We know where you are. We will kill to protect ourselves. Back off."

They backed off. CSIS disbanded the Tainchel, and an uneasy truce began.

The truce lasted. Estelle and I didn't. She argued against the ambush, the killings. I argued that we fought for our existence. In the end, we just argued.

Robert and I had been friends for years, and through me he came to know Estelle. After I exited the scene, the two of them became more than friends. About then, I resigned from the Circle. Robbie replaced me there too.

Dance, spirits. Dance with the beasts of the night.

Growling, Gelert turned toward a dim rustle in the forest. I gave the dog a mental command to lie down again. Stealth was not my intruder's aim. I stood as Leiddia stepped out of the trees, stopping at the edge of the firelight.

She smiled. "Hello again."

"Hi yourself."

"You don't seem surprised."

"I had the feeling you wanted to tell me something."

"Yep," she said, "You're a wolf."

I tried to remain expressionless. "Excuse me?"

She walked to the opposite side of the fire and sat on the ground, grinning. "Blaidd. I looked it up. It's Welsh for wolf."

"Oh, right. I forgot I told you."

I sat again, as Gelert came over to nuzzle her. She took his huge head in both hands, rubbing him behind the ears. "And what's your name?"

I told her and she made a face. "Gelert was the legendary hound of Prince Llewellyn of Wales," I explained.

"Hmm. So, why does Ed call you Grey Legs?"

I chuckled. "The Cree believe using its name will attract a wolf. So they call it Grey Legs, Grey Coat, Golden Tooth, Silent One. Ever since I told him what my name meant, he's called me that, as a joke."

She smiled again. "So he thinks you're a wolf, too."

I grinned back. In the store, I'd been so intent on her aura of the Mark, I'd overlooked how attractive she was. Gelert liked her too, always a good sign.

She stared at me. "You are a wolf."

I remained silent.

"What's it like," she asked, "to change, to be that way?"

"You do know, don't you? How?"

"Your friend, Robert. We met during the funerals at the church. Something about me fascinated him. He kept staring at me."

"Can't say I blame him."

"It wasn't that kind of interest, but thanks," she said smiling. "Anyway, I knew he was different too, but I didn't know what it was."

She shifted her gaze to the flames. "He was so upset, so sad. He said he had something to tell me, about me. That something must be added for what was lost. I didn't understand, but I wasn't afraid of him. Somehow, I knew I could trust him."

I smiled. That was Robbie — the size of a grizzly, but women treated him like a big teddy bear.

"At the cemetery after the burials, we walked together. We found a big stone just inside the forest, and sat and talked. Well, he talked. I just listened. He told me of the Herok'a, of how you are a race older than man. How you each are linked to an animal species."

I nodded. "We have many names. The Cree called us the Herok'a, or Earth Spirits. They believed my people were ancestrally related to different animals, similar to totems. We bear traits and abilities of our totem animal, like keener senses, greater strength." I turned to Gelert. "And we can command those animals."

Without a word from me, Gelert trotted to my tent and emerged holding a cup in his mouth. He dropped it in my hand.

"Coffee?" I asked.

She laughed. "I guess house-training Gelert wasn't a problem. Thanks, just black is fine." She looked serious again. "Robert told me more."

I reached for the coffee pot hanging over the fire. "That we can change into our totem animals."

She nodded.

"You believed him?"

She took the cup from me. "Pretty well had to. He showed me. He changed."

I gave a low whistle. "He must have been sure about you."

"He said I had the right to know, that I had the Mark."

"Yes. Yes, you do," I said quietly.

"Then I'm one of you?" She leaned forward quickly, spilling coffee onto the ground.

I shook my head. "No. Not yet anyway. Very few with the Mark ever become one of the Herok'a. They need assistance. Didn't Robert explain?"

"He had something to do first, something he owed someone. He was going away but said he'd be back to explain more and help me."



Illustration by Tim Johnson

She got up then and walked to me slowly, as if trying not to frighten away an animal which had strayed in from the forest. She sat beside me, her leg

brushing against mine, her breath cool and sweet on my face. I noticed something else.

"Your cheek," I began, reaching out.

She turned away. "He hit me."

"Your stepfather?"

She nodded.

I turned her face back to me with a finger on her chin. "Why?"

She looked down. "He was... touching me. I made him stop."

My hand squeezed her shoulder. "Has he tried this before?"

"No," she said with a sneer. "He's always saved his special attentions for Mom." She leaned against me, her head against my shoulder. "I hate him and I'm scared, Gwyn." Her voice was low but firm. "I wish I had your strength, your powers."

Wrapping my arms around her, I held her for a long time, neither of us speaking. Technically, I had to petition the Circle first, but I was never much on policy. To me it was her right. I thought other mom and Tom Barker. I thought of Tom with her.

"You'll have my powers," I said. "I'll give you your birthright."

She sat straight up. "You can do that? How?"

I grinned. "Well, there's the classical method or the modern approach, plus some, uh, variations. In the classical scenario, I shape shift and savagely attack you. Unique microorganisms in my saliva and in oils excreted from my claw tips enter your blood stream through your various wounds, meeting up with some equally unique enzymes which those with the Mark carry. This results in a mutated enzyme which modifies your cell structure. You're then of the Herok'a, assuming you survive my attack."

She snuggled close again. "Well, I like where you attack me, but not the various wounds part."

"Chicken. Okay, the modern version then. I make an incision somewhere you don't mind having scars, and apply a poultice moistened with my blood."

She wrinkled her nose. "Saliva, oils, blood. The Herok'a don't practice safe shifting, do they?"

"We're immune to most human viral and bacterial infections, including AIDS. Some Herok'a diseases exist, but they're treatable."

"Hoof and mouth disease?"

"Smart ass."

Leiddia laughed then looked thoughtful. "So I need to get certain of your bodily fluids into my bloodstream." She moved to rest her chin on my shoulder. "You mentioned variations?"

I stroked her hair. "They involve, uh, other bodily fluids."

She leaned forward, brushing her lips against mine. "And other methods of application?"

I nodded, pulling her to me into a long kiss. "So," I asked after a while, "which method would the patient prefer?"

"I'll try," she said, between kisses, "the variations."

Several variations later, we were both asleep.



I awoke alone except for Gelert, which wasn't what I'd had in mind. Over breakfast, I pondered whether I felt used.

She was a big girl. She'd known what she was after. She'd gotten it.

Used. I shrugged mentally. Not the first time.

Leaving Gelert to guard the plane, I broke camp and set out immediately for the driver's cabin. I wanted daylight to scout the area, and assure myself this was not a trap.

Mitch and I had divided Robbie's two targets. Mitch had planned to cover Conrad in Toronto, while I watched the truck driver, since I'd lived here after Stelle and I split. That was our plan four days ago. Somehow, Robbie had known Conrad would be away from Toronto that night at his lodge in the Muskokas, and had killed him there. Once Mitch heard of Conrad's death, he'd head here, but Robbie had a full day on him.

It was up to me.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees, warming the crisp fall day, as I followed familiar forest trails. My thoughts kept drifting to Leiddia.

Ed's map was clear, and I made good time, reaching a rise overlooking the cabin by early afternoon. Finding a spot with good cover and a clear view of the building, I watched, listened, and smelt the breeze. I repeated this process at three other locations before I was satisfied.

The driver was there, plus three men with rifles. Conrad's death had not gone unnoticed. I could detect no one else.

My plan was to intercept Robbie on his way to the cabin, away from the attention of the guards. My problem became figuring which route he'd take.

Three sides of the cabin were open field. Approaching undetected required coming in from behind, moving down through trees from the rise where I now stood. Undergrowth choked most routes to the rise. The best path followed a forested ridge, where the forest floor was clear under the roof of trees.

I picked a spot giving a view of both the ridge and the fields surrounding the cabin, and downwind from the ridge path. After a snack of dried beef washed down with warm water, I settled behind a huge fallen tree to watch, wait, and sniff.

One hour. Darkness. Two hours. Moonrise. Four hours. Predators are used to waiting. I spent the time thinking of Leiddia. Her face and body kept shifting into Stelle's.

Midnight. The cry of a screech owl brought my head up. I shivered in the cold. The owl. Symbol of the souls of the dead in Indian myths. Shamans gave owl feathers to the dying to help them pass into the next world.

Just then, I caught a whiff. A minute later, I saw a huge shadow moving steadily along the ridge. For a moment, I thought I saw two shapes. Must have been the light. I watched long enough to guess his route, then moved to an intercept position.

Hidden, I listened. Twigs breaking, leaves rustling. Closer. Footsteps, breathing. I stepped out in front of him.

Startled, he stopped, dropping into a defensive stance. Suddenly, I became aware of something some distance behind him. Something big and moving fast. And growling. Shit. He'd brought help.

"Robbie! It's me, Gwyn!" The grizzly closed on me quickly, while I assessed the best tree to scale.

"Callisto! Halt!" Robbie's voice ripped the night. The huge beast rumbled to a stop at his side, snorted in my direction, then settled back on its great haunches.

Robbie was wearing jeans and hiking boots, and a denim jacket over a white T-shirt. He was bigger than I remembered. Reaching out to stroke the grizzly's hump, he looked me over. "Hello, wolf-man. Been a long time."

"Too long, Robbie," I said, trying to sound more casual than I felt.

He seemed to think this over, scuffing the ground with a toe. "Come to help me finish?"

I shook my head.

"No. No, I didn't think so," he said sadly, then his face hardened. Pouncing with a speed belying his size, he caught me in the chest with his shoulder, knocking me to the ground. I rolled and sprang to my feet. If he pinned me, it was over. We circled each other.

"Can't we talk?" I gasped, forcing air back into my lungs.

"Talking's done. We talked, we sang," he snarled, "we died. Now they die."

He tried a foot sweep. I backed away. Apparently he was keeping his teddy out of it. Maybe he wanted a fair fight, which would be like him. Maybe he was worried I might have some reserves too.

Robert was a grappler, a wrestler. My style was karate — blocks and strikes. Not needing my hands to grasp meant I had an option he didn't. Staying in a left fighting stance, I moved my right hand closer to my body where my left arm hid it.

"You're not a killer, Robbie. Let it be."

Slowly. Concentrate. Keep circling. Gradually I felt it work. Now, I had to use it without killing him.

"Let it be? You mean, leave him to you. Well, he's mine, Gwyn. He dies by my hand, not yours."

I didn't get a chance to reply. He moved in, feinting a high punch, then dropped his shoulder and threw out an arm to circle my waist for a takedown. I side stepped and blocked the arm, spinning him around and exposing his side. I drove in with my right hand, striking for the shoulder.

A useless target for a normal strike. But not this strike.

Three inches of claws sank into flesh and muscle. A cheap shot. In tournaments, you must announce or display shifts. Ibis wasn't a tournament.

He roared, spinning free but tearing open the wound. He stepped back groaning, left arm limp, useless. The grizzly growled but stayed put.

"It's over, Robbie," I said softly, shifting my hand back to normal.

He sank to his knees, head bowed. "Damn you... wanted to do it myself... she was mine too..." he muttered, then looked up. "Take me with you. It's

not much farther. Let me see you do it." His face went dark. "I want to see him die, Gwyn."

"What the hell are you talking about? Nobody's killing anybody. What's with you? Stelle's going to flip! She hates killing. You're going to destroy her, man."

He stared up at me, the strangest look on his face.

Something must be added for what was lost.

A chill filled my belly.

She was mine too.

"Gwyn," he said. His voice was gentle.

A lot of us are activists. I got Stelle into it.

"Stelle's dead. They killed her..."

A female protestor from out of town also died.

He dropped his head sobbing. I stood there, feeling like the leaves at my feet-brITTLE, broken, dead.

I got Stelle into it. Mitch. He'd known, of course, but he needed me to stop Robbie. Isolated and estranged as I was from both Stelle and Robbie, he'd gambled on me not knowing. With one of the Herok'a already out for revenge, he knew that if he told me, I'd be racing Robbie to the kill. Now I did know. So what was I going to do? Standing there, I realized that I'd always thought Stelle and I would get back together somehow, sometime. I had never stopped loving her, never believed it was over. I shook my head, fighting the anger and the tears. Too much killing, she had said. I knew what she'd say now.

"Come on, Robbie," I said quietly. "Let's go home."

I'll never know who their first target really was. They must have held back after I appeared, hoping we'd kill each other. When we stopped fighting, they stopped waiting.

I had just knelt to help Robbie up, when the bullet caught him in the bad shoulder. He took another in the chest before I pulled him to the ground and threw myself flat. I looked back in the direction of the cabin. A line of figures was moving toward us through the trees. Figures with guns. The Tainchel.

"How many?" he gasped.

"Too many."

"Those aren't tank guns," he groaned. "I think they've given themselves a new mandate." They'd be on us in seconds, but I couldn't leave Robbie behind.

"Just... bought you... some time," Robbie gasped. The next second I knew what he meant.

Sixteen hundred pounds of furred fury burst from a thicket. Charging into the nearest group, it grabbed a man in its jaws and threw him against a tree. Rearing up three meters on hind legs, Callisto sent two more spinning through the air with a slashing swipe of her paw.



I watched transfixed "Run, Gwyn," Robbie said. "You can't save me."

I shook my head. Bodies at her feet, Callisto turned to charge another cluster. More fell before her. The rest were firing at the grizzly but still she attacked. The shooting continued, and she was slowing. Rushing another man, she reared to her full height and fell on her screaming victim. She didn't rise.

Robbie sobbed quietly.

They put more shots into her. Silence followed. No movement. Callisto had made them cautious. She'd bought us time.

Robbie was pale, breathing in rapid gasps. The Indians believed the bear possessed great curative powers. Robbie needed more than legends.

I called out. "Listen to me! I'll make this easy. Get my friend medical help and I'll surrender." Robbie shook his head violently, prompting a coughing fit.

Nothing.

"No deals," a voice finally replied, "and no prisoners!"

The firing started again, heavier this time. Keeping my head down, I started to concentrate on a shift. It was our last chance. They wanted blood.

Robbie grabbed my arm just as I sensed them. Too late. Something crashed down on my skull, and I slumped forward, stunned. Fighting for control, I managed to turn my head to look behind me.

Two men. Two rifles.

The firing from in front of us stopped. These two had used that sound cover to sneak up behind us. Focusing on my shift had dulled my other senses.

"Silver bullet time, freak," said the closest one. Grinning, he raised his rifle.

With a deafening roar, a grey mass hurtled out of the shadows. Huge jaws closed on the man's neck with a sickening snap. A black blur pulled down the other gunman. Around us, the Tainchel screamed and cursed, dark forms leaping at them from all sides.

My puppy had arrived, and he'd brought friends.

Gelert shoved his face into mine, licking and whining. I could smell blood. Throwing an arm over his great back, I pulled myself up and looked around.

The wolves outnumbered the Tainchel, but the men had guns, and their initial shock was wearing off. The survivors were in a clump, backs to each other, firing outwards. My grey brothers were falling, dying. Dying for me.

I shifted. The Black Wolf came among them.

★ ★ ★

I came out of it with Gelert nuzzling my face. A dozen wolves clustered around me, wagging their tails or licking wounds. Pain screaming from a dozen places, I rose stiffly but found no major damage.

I remember little after a shift. Walking around, counting the dead, I figured it was just as well. Six wolves, eighteen of the Tainchel. No human survivors. Naked and freezing, my clothes shredded from the shift, I stripped one of the less bloody bodies for garments.

I found him lying against a tree, deathly white, soaked in blood. I knelt beside him. "Robbie?"

His eyes focused on me. "Gwyn...," he whispered, "there's a girl... Leiddia..."

"I know. She's one of us now."

He smiled. "You and I... always finding the same woman." The smile faded. "Stelle... never stopped loving you. Sometimes... I hated you for that. Sorry." His eyes closed.

I swallowed hard. "Robbie, sometimes I hated you for being with her. I'm sorry too."

No reply.

"Robbie?"

I felt for a pulse, but I knew. I could smell it. The Bear was dead. I wondered if he had heard me.

In a nearby clearing away from the trees, I built a low bier from rocks, piling it with dried branches. I dragged him over and with a great struggle lifted him on top. Beside him, I placed my dead wolven brethren. Callisto, too huge to move, I covered with rocks.

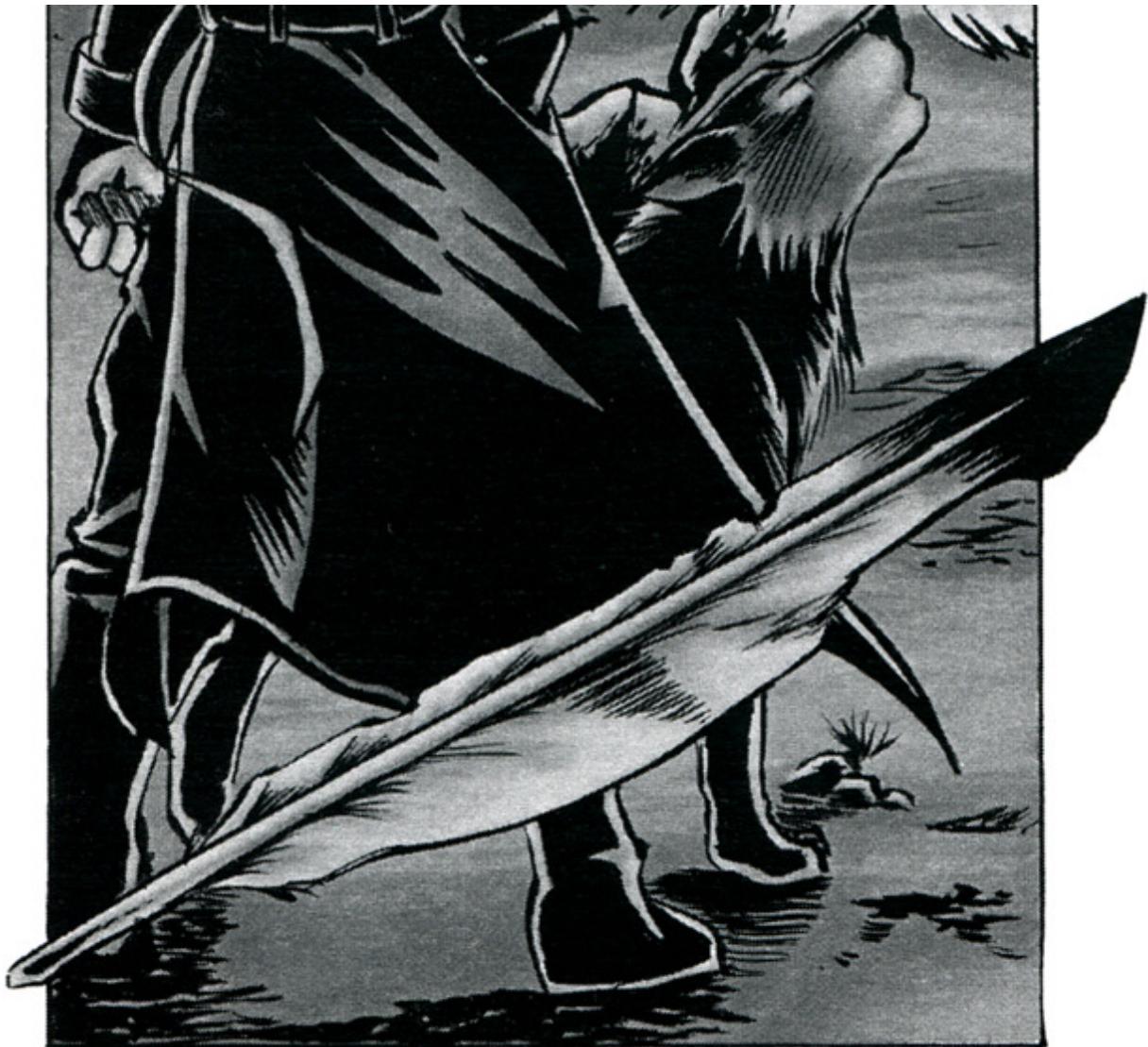
A search of the bodies provided matches. As I returned, a great horned owl lifted up from the bier into the night. A single feather lay on Robbie's chest. I held it for a moment, then tucked it into his shirt.

I lit the wood and stood back as the fire caught quickly, roaring with the rising wind. Turning from the flames and smoke, I stopped, surrounded.

Bears, wolves, coyotes, foxes, animals of all kinds encircled the pyre. Gelert began a mournful howl, picked up by the wolves. The other animals joined with growls, roars, and snarls.

Howl, beasts of the night. Howl for our fallen. Howl over the bodies of our foes.





I walked away through smoke and mist and trees, Gelert at my side, until we stood looking down at the driver's cabin. The guards pointed up the hill at the glow of the fire.

One task remained. They had killed my woman. They had killed my friend. Gelert growled.

I began to shift. A wolf howled.

No prisoners.

★ ★ ★

Ed was behind the counter when I came into the store the next afternoon. He looked up but didn't smile. "Made up some supplies for you."

"How'd you know I'd be heading out?"

He said nothing, but pushed the newspaper forward. I read the front page. The bodies had been found already.

"You'd better go, Gwyn."

I looked up. He had turned his back. Taking the supplies, I placed more money than required on the counter.

As I moved to the door, he spoke again, his back still to me. "Tom Barker was at the hospital last night. Cut up real bad. That nurse Vera knows said it looked like he'd fought a wild cat and lost." He turned to look at me. "He's left them. Says he's not going back."

"Probably for the best," I said quietly.

"Yeah. Assuming they can support themselves," he replied, an edge to his voice.

I walked to the door, not looking back.

"Guess there's one more beast in the night now," he said under his breath. I'm not sure if he meant me to hear. As I stepped outside, I felt that Ed was making a warding sign, a sign to keep away the beasts of the night. I hoped I was wrong.

★ ★ ★

It is night now. I sit in my camp and stare as the spirits dance in my fire. Feel their heat on my body. Feel my body an empty shell, hollow. Wait for the fire spirits to bake it hard. Wait for the animal cry in the night to shatter this shell, crumble it to dust. Listen to the wind which will blow the dust, scatter me, send me... away.

Stelle is dead. Robbie is dead. I am dead too. Perhaps I have been dead these past fifteen years.

The wind stirs the ashes, dancing the flames. Gelert raises his mighty head to stare into the darkness. The fire crackles. A branch snaps behind me. I turn to see liquid night flow feline from the trees toward me. It shifts. It changes. Twin emerald fires melt to grey green eyes. Paws become hands. Paws become feet. Ebony fur fades to the pale smoothness of her skin, streams to the black cascade other hair. Naked, she stands before me, cat-beast of the night now woman again.

I walk to her slowly, as if trying not to frighten away an animal which has strayed in from the forest. Wrapping my coat about her, I stare at her searching for something there to fill this empty shell, and she endures it.

"Then it worked," I finally say.

"It worked," she replies, a sound with the breeze. She touches my cheek, tracing a line with a long sharp nail. "I need a teacher."

"I need," I begin, before my throat strangles the words and the tears flow. "I need much more than that."

She whispers, "I love you," as we lie down by the fire, and I say I love her too. I hope one day we can mean it when we say it, as I fill her emptiness and she begins to fill mine.

After, I watch her sleep by the dying ember light. Stelle is dead. Robbie is dead. But another of the Herok'a lies beside me. The spirits do not dance. For now, it is enough.





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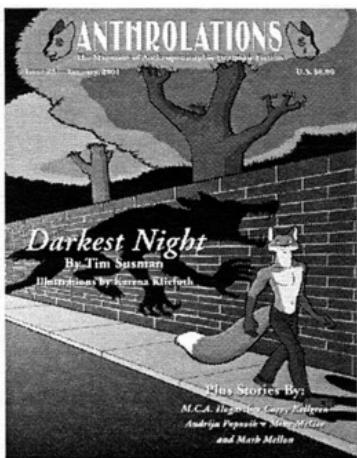
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# Red

**Elan Ruskin**

Twice a finalist for the Isaac Asimov Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Science Fiction Writing, Elan Ruskin has also worked as a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He is presently involved in critical video game research as a graduate student at the Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center. *Anthrolations* is his first paid fiction sale. Elan wishes to thank Albert Dibartolomeo for his assistance with this story.

Odis Holcomb currently resides in Northwest Arkansas where he works as a freelance illustrator. His work has appeared on album covers, role-playing games, and novels. He recently completed work on the cover and interior illustrations for *Breaking the Ice: Stories from New Tibet*, an anthology available from Sofawolf Press. You can find samples of his work and contact information on his website ([www.themarchhare.org](http://www.themarchhare.org)).

Every child nowadays has heard the story of Little Red Riding Hood, and every child thinks they know the one and true story of what happened to that little girl. Red's story, however, has been through revision after revision, such that the truth is barely discernable underneath the modern telling. The red hood, for example, was an invention of Charles Perrault, who cleaned up the old folk stories of the French for popular consumption in the eighteenth century. The happy ending is a still later addition, and even the most obvious unhappy ending a bit of a fib. The old stories were meant to frighten, or to teach, or to make the unknown still more terrifying or horrible. We wolves, however, have our own story — the true story, for the old Fenris of the tale never did die, and his is the tale that is true.



Once upon a time, there lived a wood — not one of the gaily colored trees-with-puffball woods of modern fantasy, but a real wood, full of dark shadows from looming trees and teeming with life that would tear you apart if it could. Among the things that lived in this wood were a wolf, who was a part of the wood, and an old woman, who was not. The wolf's name was Acquisitor-of-the-Pack, which is not important, and the old woman's name was Sarah, which was perhaps important to her. The old woman had a daughter, a perfectly ordinary farmer's wife who lived a small distance away from the edge of the wood, and a granddaughter, a little girl who was called Red because of her hair, which shone like blood on wet grass. Now Red's grandmother was old and infirm, as humans become in their great age, and unable to fend for herself, so Red was told to bring bread and milk to her one morning, as the spring sun was just beginning to rise over the trees.

Red had her own ideas about ferrying bread and milk to grandmothers, but at the same time she happened to know of a certain young woodcutter living on the opposite side of the wood, and so accepted the task. Before leaving, she gave it to her mother to understand that, the way to the grandmother's house being so long and treacherous, and the woods being so difficult to navigate, it would take her perhaps an entire day to make the trip, and so of course with a heavy heart Red accepted the possibility that she might have to spend the night on the other side of the forest. There were, after all, far too many hungry things in the wood to make the return by night.

Now at this time, the wolf was hunting in the forest. Hunting, unlike the storybooks say, is primarily a matter of waiting and watching; one waits in the shadows, moving quietly if at all, and watches to see what forms move between branches and what scents carry themselves upon the wind. Scent, unlike form, cannot be masked, and the toothsome odor of a chipmunk or the pungent spice of a fresh kill can carry for great distances upon the wind, singling themselves out from the bland stench of the flowers and trees themselves. So it was not at all astonishing to the wolf when he scented the uniquely bitter tang of a human girl entering his woods, nor was it very long before he made to close upon her. Spying her hair through the foliage, he pulled a poppy-flower from where it grew among the trees (for things both great and small grow in any respectable wood), and placed himself in her path.

"Who are you?" she cried in surprise. The wolf smiled in return. "Merely one who loves to pick fresh, pretty flowers. Pray, smell this one that I have

just found," he replied, offering it towards her. Red, who loved flowers as all young girls do, took it in delight and smelled its fragrance deeply. As she did so, the wolf took his turn to ask, "Now who might you be, and where are you going?"

Warmed by the scent of the flower, she answered quickly. "I am Red, on my way to bring this bread and milk to my ailing grandmother. Would you like your flower back?"

"No, keep it, as a gift. And goodspeed upon your way!" the wolf laughed, bounding off between the trees. Red smiled, and put the flower near her heart, where she could scent it, and stroke it gently from time to time, while she walked. The woodcutter would see it and wonder, and perhaps, she thought, that would prove useful.



O. Holcomb - 2001-

Now, Red was walking by the clear and well-lit path that men had carved through the wood, and the wolf was speeding through the roots and bowels of the forest; twice he passed by the fresh trail of a prey beast without even lifting his head, such was his haste. So it was inevitable that he was first to reach the grandmother's house. Once there, he killed the frail hag before she could even finish her death-mewl, poured her blood into a bottle and sliced her flesh onto a plate. He pricked his paw with the serving-knife and poured a few drops of his own blood into each of each of these. The moment his blood touched the grandmother's, it took on the appearance of the finest red wine to be found in those parts, and the moment his own blood touched the flesh, it looked to be already well-cooked, charred in a human oven. The bottle and the plate he put in the pantry, and then he put on the grandmother's nightclothes and waited in bed.

It was not very long after then that Red, feeling very fine from her walk, the songbirds that circled over the man's path in the wood, and the thought of what she would do before the noonday sun touched the ground, came to the grandmother's house and knocked on the door. "Come in, my dear," said the voice from within, and in Red went.

"I've brought you some bread and milk, Grandmother," Red said to the dark figure under the bedclothes.

"Very kind of you, my dear. Put it in the pantry, and please, have something for yourself. There is meat and wine there for you."

Red put her gifts away carefully, and as she took down the plate of meat and the bottle of wine, she wondered at having brought bread to a woman with meat other own. Aloud, she asked only, "but where did you get these from, Grandmother?"

"Oh, they were a gift to me from someone who lives around here," the wolf cackled. "Pray, sit by the fire and eat. It is the least thanks I can give."

The girl did as she was told, and as the first piece of meat passed within her lips was overcome by sensation. That which had previously smelled to her only of the general sense of cooked food, was suddenly a myriad of odours, from the richness of the blood still in the flesh to the sweet scent of freshkilled carrion. The fire smelled of every tree whose wood had been sacrificed to it, and she scented clearly something small and afraid next to it. Red's eyes flickered to the bed, meeting for a moment with a piercing hazel stare, and then to the fire, where she saw the tiny, ever-timid shape of a rat that had found its way inside against the cold. Red's gaze never left the

rodent as she took the first sip of wine into her mouth, nor did it stray when she was overcome by a giddy warmth, a fire that burned within her own veins.

"It is terribly warm in here," she said, "what shall I do with my shawl?"

"Throw it on the fire," replied the wolf. "You won't need it any more."

And as she did, the little rat cried, "Beware, for you eat the flesh and drink the blood of your grandmother," but Red paid it no mind, for her mother had wisely told her never to listen to rats.

The more she ate of the meat, the more she became overcome with a sense of hunger that the flesh seemed not to satisfy. It was too still, she thought, too long dead. The quick of life no longer ran through it, and it was stale and flat. The more she drank of the wine, the more she became aware of the scent and sensations that flowed through the house around her, the quivering fear of the rat, and of her own smell, murky and hot. The wolf's eyes never left her as she finished her meal.

Once Red had licked the last scrap of flesh from the plate and drained the last drop of wine from the bottle, she found herself overcome by an odd sense of itching, as if every muscle in her body were ready to leap through her skin. Her fingers twitched of their own accord and every breath of air across her body was a clearly felt caress. At the same time, Red felt a sense of terrible emptiness, though her belly was still gorged with meat.

"You must be very tired after that walk," said the wolf. "Come to bed with me; but first you must undress."

"But what shall I do with my skirt, Grandmother?" asked Red.

"Throw it on the fire," said the wolf; "you won't need it any more."

And as Red threw the skirt on the fire, it leapt up, filling with flickering hazel eyes of flame. For every garment that she wore, shoes, bodice, and stockings, Red asked the wolf the same question, and his answer was always the same: "Throw it on the fire; you won't need it any more." Finally, her nude body gleamed in the firelight, reds and oranges reflecting off her every slick, hairless surface. The fire sparked and crackled as the last of her clothing drifted away as smoke, and Red sat there, savouring the richness of the smells, and watching the rat as it scurried quietly against the base of the wall.

"Do you see it as I do, Red?" asked the wolf.

"I see it," she replied, her head following the rodent perfectly.

"Do you smell it as I do, Red?" asked the wolf.

"I smell it," she replied, slowly rising to a crouch, her weight riding on outspread toes and fingers.

"Do you feel it as I do, Red?" asked the wolf.

"I feel it," she replied, keenly aware of her unexplained hunger, of the tension other muscles, of the fear of the rat. It took only a moment's change in that tension, only a moment's scuffle, before a tiny corpse swung gently from her fingers. Now, she knew, her hunger was truly sated.

"Did you find anything, dearie?" asked the wolf.

"Your house is full of vermin, grandmother," she replied.

"Show me." The wolf pulled the covers high, only his gleaming eyes still visible. Red crossed to him, padding properly on the toes of her feet.

The rat hung inches over the wolfs eyes. "I found this by the fire. Nasty things it said."

"What did it say?"

Red smiled. "It said you weren't my grandmother."

"Why would it say that?"

At this she leaned close to the wolfs furred ear, traced gently the path it rose atop his head, and whispered, "because you're not."

"And what makes you think that?"

"You don't stink like she does."

"My, what a keen nose you have, my dear," the wolf replied.

Now Red got into bed, and pressed herself against the warmth of the wolf, overcome for a moment by his own hungry scent, so very much like her own. As she did so, he grinned and ran his tongue gently across the bridge of her nose, and where his tongue touched her pallid skin took on a lustrous, dark, leathery sheen. The rat fell gently by the bedside.

"You don't look at all like her, either."

"And what keen eyes you have, my dear," the wolf replied, and when Red closed them, he kissed each one once, gently. When she opened them again, they were of the deepest hazel, flecked through with black.

"Much hairier than her, too."

"And my, what lovely hair you have," the wolf replied as he ran his paws through Red's tresses.

Where his fingers touched, the hair faded from red to gray; and once his fingers had run through the hair, his claws traced long lines of silver fur down her back.

"Though I must admit she had a bit of bristle."

"But my, what a smooth neck you have, my dear," breathed the wolf, and lipped it gently. Soon, Red's pelt covered her throat as well, shimmering forth in a silver wave from her back to cover her entire body.

"And her fingers were frail and bony."

"But what supple fingers you have, my dear!", and the wolf entwined his with hers, running their hands down the length of her body. Her claws raked lines beside his as he stroked them across her newly muscled thighs.

"And her skin was dry, almost tanned leather."

"And my, how dry you aren't, my dear," the wolf giggled, moving a hand upwards and inwards. Red growled, a deep rumble of clear meaning.

"And she was a sick sack of bones."

"My, how trim you are, my dear," the wolf murmured, running his tongue slowly, circuitously, and deliberately down the length of her firm abdomen, already covered with traceries of fine white pelt.

"And — eek! What a supple tongue you have!"

But the wolf said nothing, for he could say nothing, his muzzle having been turned to more productive pursuits. Red shuddered, and growled quietly to herself, and when a while later the wolf tired of his meal's first course, his lips working their way back up to hers, Red smiled into his face and could only giggle, "What sharp teeth you have!"

And here the story is always got wrong, for the wolf did not eat her, or at least, not again; he merely raked one tooth, slowly and with no small degree of gentleness, across the length of her neck, and he licked away the one ruby drop of blood that formed. And then it was not too long before the only light in that house was the firelight, shining upon two wolves, whose pack grows ever larger.



# The One with the Spooky House

**Tim Susman**

Tim Susman is a web database consultant living in southern California. His works have appeared in several small press publications and many times in the pages of *Anthrolations*. In 1999, he co-founded Sofawolf Press as a way to make his writing and editing sound official. Their first anthology and his editorial debut. *Breaking the Ice: Stories from New Tibet*, was released in January 2002.

John Nunnemacher graduated with honors from the Graphic Arts program at Moravian College in Pennsylvania. Since then, he has worked a long string of diverse jobs, including serving as Production Manager for a monthly business journal, drawing caricatures in the Florida heat and humidity at SeaWorld, and creating animation and character layouts for projects such as *Dilbert: The Animated Series*, and Disney's *The Tigger Movie*.

Three little white-tipped russet tails twitched back and forth behind the bush. Three sets of gleaming eyes peered out of the bush at the tall metal fence and the forbidding house beyond. Peeling white paint covered the old wooden boards of the house, and on the roof, dark patches showed where shingles had dropped off over the years. The dark windows reflected the starlight — all except for one, and that was where the eyes were focused.

"I told you you threw it too hard, Sharlin," one voice whispered.

"I think we should go get Mom and Dad."

"Hush up, Crystal." Sharlin looked at the shattered window and chewed his paw.

"Well, if we don't get them, how will we get our ball back?"

"I think Sharlin should go get it. He threw it."

"You're the one who was teasin' me, Bridgie!"

"You still threw it." Bridget smiled smugly and rested her muzzle on her paws. "Anyway, I din' say you should throw it at the old house. I just said you throw like a girl."

Sharlin bit back a reply. It didn't do any good to tell his sisters they threw like girls too. He looked at the old house again and listened. No sounds came over the breeze to him except the creaks of settling wood.



"Maybe they're not home," he said.

"Of course they're home," Crystal said. "That's why Daddy said never to go in there."

"If he never goes in there, how would he know? Maybe they don't live there any more."

Bridget snorted. "Don't be stupid."

Sharlin flattened his ears and growled his best big-fox growl. "Well, how do YOU know they still live there?"

"The gate's locked. They wouldn't move out and leave the gate locked."

"Well... maybe they went out and locked the gate behind them." Sharlin hated it when his sister was right. He lifted his nose to the wind. "Besides, I can't smell them."

"The wind's coming from behind us, dope. You're just afraid to go in there."

He tossed his head in the direction of the house. "Am not! Those old biddies don't scare me!"

"Then why don't you go in and get our ball?"

"I..." No use; she had him well and truly trapped now. The house seemed to sneer at him in the shadowed starlight, and then the moon came out from behind a cloud. White sticks below the door gleamed at him like the bones of foolhardy fox cubs.

"I heard there was a cub who went in there and he was so scared his fur turned all white and he had to go away and if you said 'boo' to him now he might die."

"Oh, hush, Crystal," Sharlin said, shifting his paws. "That couldn't happen."

"Gregory's fur is all white."

"His mom and dad are white, too. They're from somewhere where it snows all the time."

Crystal flicked her ears. "So? They had to get all white somehow."

"Yeah," Bridget chipped in. "Maybe they went in there and got scared and were so scared even their cub went white!" She seemed excited by the possibility.

"Hmph. Well, maybe if my fur goes white, yours will too."

Crystal dismissed that with a paw. "An' did you hear Mommy and Daddy talk about Miss Poplar? They said she had her nerves break down. I bet she

saw something scary."

"Maybe she looked in the mirror." Bridget giggled.

"Jake said she had mange and had to go 'way," Sharlin said. "Anyway, I'm not some ol' vixen. I'm a big renard! I bet I coulda chewed up whatever scared her."

Bridget sniggered. "As long as it didn't look like a grasshopper."

Sharlin felt his ears flush and he pinned them back. "That was two years ago!" Bridget laughed, and he pounced on her. The bush shook with their tussling for a few moments as Crystal backed away from the yips and growls.

"Ow! Okay, lemme up!" Sharlin squeaked finally. Bridget clambered off him and sat in front of the bush while he licked his fur back into place, tail curled under himself sulkily. "You're still scared to go in there," she taunted him.

"Am not." He felt he had something to prove now, and stood up, arching his tail behind him. "You'll see. I'll get the ball back."

"You're not really going in, are you?" Crystal said as he padded towards the fence.

"Sure I am." The fence looked cold and forbidding, making him pause. "I gotta get our ball back." And show Bridgie I'm not scared, he said to himself.

"I think we should get Daddy." "Oh, Crystal, go get him yourself, then. I'm gonna get our ball." He marched resolutely toward the fence, barely noticing when Crystal took off up the hill. At the fence, he sat on his haunches and looked up at the metal links. They rose up several feet higher than his ears and gleamed in the moonlight. He put his paw on one of the links. He could climb it. Probably.

"It's not as high as the tree you fell out of last summer," Bridget teased him.

"I'm goin', I'm goin'!" He put a paw further up the fence, then jumped up onto it, catching his hind legs on some links at the bottom.

It took him a few minutes to get the hang of climbing the fence. More than once he snagged a claw in a link and had to work it free. He looked back at Bridget when he did, but she was back under the bush and he could only see the shine of her eyes watching him.

The top of the fence was jagged. He placed his paws carefully and surveyed the yard. It was empty and still, scattered with patches of feeble grass that looked sickly and pale. Dead grass littered the open spaces, gleaming pale against the dark ground. Sharlin swallowed and gathered himself to jump down.

He landed on soft ground, a bit softer than outside the fence. The house smelled old and rank, now that he was closer, and behind the old wood he could smell the mustiness of cobwebs, dead bugs, and a whiff of something else. Yes, they were home. He stood still in the yard, not even letting his tail twitch, then cautiously put one paw forward. Nothing stirred. He looked around and then, bolder, took two steps toward the door. A glance back across the fence confirmed that Bridget was still watching him, her eyes glowing with reflected starlight.

Resolutely, he padded as quietly as he could up to the door, ignoring the white sticks (they were definitely only sticks, he was sure) and nosed at it. It creaked open slowly, and he jumped back. He could smell more of the interior now, and hear rustlings and murmurings. The smell was strange, but had an oddly compelling quality. Tentatively, he poked his nose into the door again, and then stepped inside.

The inside of the house seemed, strangely, to be one big room. Lofts rose up along each wall, evenly spaced, the lowest just high enough that he could see over it. He could see the starlight through the dirty windows near the ceiling, and every so often a waft of fresh air drifted through the broken window and down to his nose.

He could see as well as smell them now. Three loft beds lined each wall in the lowest tier and there was someone asleep on most of them, in rough beds of straw. Sharlin lifted his nose and was surprised to find that amidst the old, decayed smell of the house, their smell was curious and oddly alluring. His cub's curiosity grabbed hold of him for a moment and lifted his muzzle up to get a better look.

Some were dark and some were light. They were not much bigger than he was, but they were curled up so that he couldn't see their heads (if they had heads, a little voice in his mind whispered). Eyes wide, he inched his nose closer to one of them, drawn by the smell. Only a couple paw-lengths away, his eye was distracted by a white gleam in the corner. Their ball!

Forgetting his curiosity, he padded across the floor. The ball was on one of the unoccupied lower loft beds, amidst a pile of straw. He headed toward it

quietly, walking as carefully as he could, but his paws still raised clouds of dust. It crept into his nose and eyes, making him blink, and as he sat up next to the ball, he could feel a pressure in his muzzle.

"Aaahh.." Oh no! He clamped his paws over his muzzle, eyes watering.

"MmmMMMM..." He tried to bring his tail over his muzzle, but it only made things worse.

"Ah-CHOO!"

Bridget had watched Sharlin creep into the house. After a few minutes of silence, she crept up to the fence and put her paws on it, ears cupped forward. She heard a small noise from inside, and then a chorus of shrieks and screams surprised her enough to make her jump backwards. Some thumps and cracks were added to the din, and just when she was convinced they were beating up her brother, he came bolting out the door with their ball in one paw. His eyes were wide as saucers, and if his fur wasn't white, it was at least bristled out so he looked twice his normal size. He sprang for the fence as the first of his pursuers came hurtling out the door after him, followed by a dozen of her sisters. Their white and brown feathers were fluffed out in fury and their beaks clacked fiercely.



"Climb, Sharlin!" Bridget shrieked.

"I can't, I can't!" He had latched three paws onto the fence about halfway up, but couldn't climb any higher without letting go of the ball.

"Throw it!!"

Sharlin yelped as the beaks grabbed at his tail. Desperately, he lofted the ball high over the fence in a perfect lob, then scurried up the metal links, out

of reach of the outraged hens. Bridget backed up, paws over her head to catch the ball. "I got it!" she called, and closed her paws around it as it fell.



Sharlin maintained stoutly thereafter that he sincerely thought he had grabbed their ball, and in his rush to get out hadn't noticed how odd it felt. He pointed out how he had offered to help lick Bridget's muzzle clean after the egg burst in her paws, covering them and her muzzle in sticky goo. Bridget, for her part, only knew that he'd been laughing so hard he practically fell off the fence, and claimed he had planned the whole thing on purpose, even down to Crystal returning with their parents at that precise moment. She sulked the whole time their mother was licking her clean, and even after their father got them another ball, it was months before she would play catch with Sharlin again.



# Optical Echoes

**Sirius Dogfire**

Sirius Dogfire is the pen name for an engineer living near the Rocky Mountains. Previous occupations in Aerospace and electronic distributors have been interesting; as in the Chinese curse of 'May your Life be Interesting'. His questionable ability to write, plus other hobbies — biking, electronics and dreams of dog sledding — are what keeps him sane.

Kim Arndt is a New York artist with a BFA in Animation from the School of Visual Arts in NYC. She currently freelances at various animation and advertising studios, having working experience in development, storyboards, design, layout, animation and direction. She also does web design ([www.tripshotpress.com](http://www.tripshotpress.com)), published illustration and commissioned work for collectors.

They each had their own mirror to themselves. Sol silently steered the vehicle on the only major roadway weaving through the limestone foothills of the H'zar mountains. Green eyes repeatedly glanced at the rearview mirror, viewing the receding roadway as if the past was slipping away and being reluctant to face the road ahead. Wasting breath on words wasn't on his agenda.

Rana sat in the passenger seat, catamount hazel eyes preferring to silently study the scenery in the passenger side-view mirror — hardwoods with their skeletal bare branches swaying in the late fall air, and evergreen firs streaming by in a woody blur — conversation with the driver being the furthest thing from her mind. A few wrinkles flickered across a pink, triangular nose perched on an angular muzzle. The deer-colored feline seemed occupied with straightening the elaborate folds in her sorrel dress, the latest from the city's fashion districts.

They had few words for each other these days.

Sol fretted, black ear tips twitching, trying to ignore the discomfort wrought by a stiff, military vest clamped around his chest. He hadn't removed it since the Veterans convention this morning. His turquoise trousers, outfitted for a tall cougar, were adjustable for comfort. The rigid vest had no such option. Made from blue ceramic armor offering only symbolic protection and bearing the gold threaded insignia of the 23rd Signal Corps, the vest had once encased a slimmer, tawny furred chest. The stout muzzled feline glanced at the odometer and noticed the map curled up in the padded clawed hands of his spouse.



Deciding that breath should be allocated for questions, he asked, "How many more kilometers to Latrin's shack?"

His in-laws had given them a map scrawled with a script of vague directions and a receipt to pick up a metal sculpture. Rana's kin had vacationed in H'zar last summer and they commissioned one of the resident hill artists to fabricate a metal sculpture for Sol and Rana's wedding anniversary. Despite the auspicious event, coinciding with Day of Memory, the gift seemed hardly adequate to bridge the silent gap that had evolved between them.

Rana finally took notice of Sol. "Ten more. We're on the right road."

With their two kits almost grown and leaving for finishing schools, they found it convenient to set up separate sleeping rooms, fulfilling an old saying that cougar pairings rarely lasted longer than a baker's dozen.

She idly pawed the pamphlet. "It's a studio, not a shack... HEY!"

Sol swerved to the edge of the two-lane road to miss getting clipped by a road train. It barreled past them, taking up more than its share of the oncoming lane. The great blur of the triple tandem, centipede wheeled cargo lorry receded in the rear view mirror.

Sol snarled, "Idiot!"

He centered the vehicle back into its rightful lane.

Growling deep in his throat, he saw Rana clutching the passenger door paneling, her back was jammed against the open backed bench seat, pupils dilated wide with fear and black tipped tail whipping in agitation. Her claws had dug into the paneling, leaving rake marks.

"That's one kind of excitement," she yowled, "I can do without!"

"Rana, take your claws off the paneling! This is a rental."

Eyes flashing, she raised her laid back ears and said stiffly, "That's what insurance is for."

Sol blanched, "It's okay, as long as we're intact."

More silence.

Sol changed the subject.

"I appreciate you coming with me to the convention." He took a deep breath and grimaced at the vise like grip of his military vest.

"I did what any spouse is supposed to do: show support with her war hero."

Rana had stood by his side at the Veterans convention in Fairmont, watching Sol greet colleagues, nodding at others she hardly knew. Former soldiers sat on wooden fabric stools, lapping Siddiqi from wide funnel cups, listening to long speeches and watching the video walls as they rubbed old, itchy scars. Imagery spilling fanfare and commemorating victory over a civil war fought half a continent away and in the vacuum wastes of a moon. Flags waving on poles with the planetary field symbolizing Era and her now united lunar mining colony under one government.

They had left at mid day to drive the tourist route through H'zar to pick up their gift.

Sol tilted his head, trying to keep the conversation going, "I was surprised when the government representative's speech mentioned, for the first time, the valor of the rebellion's soldiers."

"It's about time someone from the High Tower noticed."

"All the past speeches had scornfully labeled them mindless minions for the insurrection."

Rana chuckled, "And decades from now, they'll be eligible for Veteran's benefits long after they're dead."

"Rana!"

"Don't 'Rana' me, Sol. You know perfectly well who benefited from the war that you and so many others sacrificed for. Higher profits for the victorious trading Cartels and consolation seats on the Board of Executives for the rebel leaders. Never mind the foot soldiers."

Sol grimaced, exposing his fangs. He didn't want to argue history with a feline who spent the war years working in government records and had few illusions about the behavior of their planetary leaders.

Flustered, he muttered, "Forget it, we're on a nice drive up to a little roadside studio."

The three wheeled vehicle rounded a bend, coming up on a grassy meadow glittering in silver flashes. Sol blinked his dazzled eyes before realizing the source came from a sculpture. A miniature metal tree spread its naked silver limbs next to a corrugated metal roofed building with large, shaded windows. A short driveway led off the road to a parking area in front of the shed. A sign in red letters hung on the front of the vertical batten siding sheathing the shed.

## **Latrin's Roadside Reflections**

He braked, turning off the road. As the aerodynamic sculpted vehicle rolled to a stop on a dirt packed parkway, he noticed a second sign, hung below the first.

### *Closed for today*

Sol made a frustrated fitz noise. They quietly sat inside, undecided on what to do next.

"At least that's an interesting hut," Rana said after a while.

She pointed towards a pathway that led from the shop up to an area where two hillocks, coated in stiff, brown meadow grass of late fall, intersected one another. Like the corners of a box. Nestled almost in that corner stood two split cabins, built of mortared waste blocks. One hovel was painted lime green, the other bone white from a coating of whitewash. A single, steep, gable timbered roof, covered in thatch, topped both of the cabins. Flat white stones lay on top of the thatch, probably to keep winter winds from blowing it off. The green hut had curtained windows, but the other was windowless. The porch, or breezeway, between the dual buildings, had a floor of wooden boards.

"So that's what a Dog Trot looks like," Rana noted while she pawed through the pages of a brochure, *The Tourist's Guide to H'zar*.

She shoved the pamphlet into Sol's lap. The article noted the unusual dual shacks built by the locals of H'zar. Colloquially named Dog Trots, one of the huts served as a den for the alpha couple and the very young, with the second doubling as a communal living space and sleeping quarters for older litters. The roofed breezeway was the household's social arena. Colorful pictures depicted a hive of activity on a Dog-Trot porch — whelps dashing about in play as elders sat on quaint wooden benches, fixing small farm tools or patching coarse, but resplendent clothing.

The reality being, Sol thought as he passed the brochure back to Rana, it was the only affordable structure built by those scratching an impoverished living from the hills of H'zar.

Sol snorted, "Dog Trot supplied with a sitting dog."

Almost halfway up the path, stood a tall, three-leg stool and on it sat the backside of a gray, thick tailed figure with triangular ears. He was staring off into space, facing the porch wedged between the two huts. The canine

slowly stood up and turned around to face the vehicle. He had a narrow muzzle, with sides that sloped sharply like the edges of a screw driver. A thick pelt covered a scrawny body. He wore short legged blue pants that were as unevenly dyed as his dark gray and dappled fur.

The coyote raised his forepaw in a slow circular wave. He gripped the stool with the other padded hand, dragging it down the hill as he approached the parked rental. The worn and battered ends of the stool's legs bounced and skittered along the dirt trail.

The canine turned off the path and carefully placed the stool next to the shed before turning his hardened face towards the feline couple. Sunlight sparkled over his eyes. One eye seemed to glint oddly, in rainbow shades that slowly paled to white.

Sol opened the driver door and eased his way out. He stood by the egg-shaped nose of the rental. He twitched his whiskers from the fuel cell's exhaust fumes drifting up his nostrils.

Rana quietly sat, watching them through the bubble windshield. At once, her huntress eyes detected movement up the hill. A small figure cavorted on the center porch of the Dog-Trot, chasing a reddish ball. A little pup, wearing a raggedy dress, twisted her lop-eared head back at her spiky tail as if to chase it. She whirled and tackled her ball instead. The skinny pup stood up, tail wagging, spherical prey held triumphantly in her paws. Her jaws were too small to grip her toy. She looked out from the porch and waved her paw in Rana's direction, dropping the ball. Rana couldn't help but wave back.

Ignoring the waving paw behind the windshield, Sol turned towards the coyote standing by the side of the shed and spoke in a raised voice, "Good afternoon. I came to pick up a sculpture and I didn't realize you were closed."

The coyote slowly strode up to the car. He swung a gray muzzle, tinged with aging white fur around his nose, to his right and kept one eye fixed on Sol. The cougar became self conscious of his added kilograms to a once lithe physique. Years at a desk job were beginning to take its toll.

The dog halted a few feet away. The left eye pupil facing the cougar seemed a normal yellow, the other was a solid layer of white that covered the entire cornea — a disturbing film that seemed to refract colors like a pool of oily water. An eye cataract.

Sol noticed the opaque lens to the blinded orb was oddly fuzed, resembling a diffraction grating.

He pondered a possible cause to the yote's peculiar affliction.

The one eyed coyote spoke at last, "Greetings. I'm closed today, being it's Day of Memory. But I can open up if you like."

He extended his paw in an oblique manner as a greeting. "Kaolin Latrin. Welcome to my studio."

Sol returned the welcome, "Salutations, I'm Sol Suasu."

He gestured to the opening passenger door. "My spouse, Rana."

Rana stood up and lowered her head in a silent greeting. She looked up, past Kaolin at the hill cabin and noticed a second canine had joined the pup standing on the breezeway. Youthful and shapely, her fur shining a silvery-white, the coyote woman's attractive features were marred by the threadbare appearance of her blouse. She seemed to look out over the horizon as if ignoring the group gathered by the shop. Kaolin studied Sol and his vest for a few moments. His dead eye flashed a dim smoldering orange by the light of the sun for a moment before returning to its milky color.

He said, "Signal Corps? First time I've seen a live one up close."

Sol gestured at his vest, "I retired after the war: Honorable Discharge." He unsnapped the back buckles and felt his sagging belly expand, relieved of its enfolding prison, "I wore it at a Veteran's convention this morning at Fairmont."

Kaolin Latrin smiled in the toothy manner of canines, "As it was once for me. Although I wasn't allowed to keep my uniform."

He glanced a knowing look at Sol. The cougar paused before addressing the former rebel soldier. "Kaolin, Rana's parents stopped by this summer to commission a tree sculpture. Would it be possible for us to pick it up?"

Sol reached into a vest pocket and pulled out a yellow receipt. He placed it into Kaolin's outstretched paw.

The coyote tilted his head, focusing his good eye on the paper, "The Theolin's... I remember them; pleasant folks with a lovely sense of humor and merriment."

For the first time, he relaxed his stern features and jowls in mirth. "They wanted to have the borne fruit and active mirrors impressed on the leaves. A wonderful choice."

He gestured at the pair, "Would you like to come in to the shop and see it? I haven't packed it in its shipping case."

Rana turned her head towards Kaolin and said, "We would be honored to see it."

She glanced back up the path and stared transfixed at the suddenly empty porch, ears twitching in surprise.

"Rana!"

Sol's call snapped her out of her trance. He was following Kaolin towards the shop entrance. Their backs had been turned towards the porch and neither had noticed what had occurred.

Rana reached Sol and whispered into his ear, "Sol, did you..."

"Not now!", Sol hissed back, wondering what the fuss was about this time.

Kaolin unlocked the sliding plank and beam door. He leaned and pushed the heavy door aside along screeching, rusty railings. Straightening up, he beckoned an invitation. The trio made their way through the wide entrance.

The actual workshop lay hidden behind another door. The remaining two thirds of the building was devoted to a display showroom, brightly lit by ceiling skylights and the front windows. Sol and Rana turned one way, then this way, prowling slowly through a maze of tables stacked with metal abstract sculptures of twisted alloy, frozen silver ferns and twig-less miniature pewter trees. Translucent gratings, silver and gold-like alloy mirrors were embedded on the made surfaces. As light diffused through the dense canopy, it became entwined into a kaleidoscopic glimmer.

Rana put aside her questions and admired the objects. She cherfed, "They're beautiful."

She turned towards an almost hidden corner and noticed a small tree perched on a desk; its base affixed to the framed bottom of a wooden packing case.

Tapping Sol's shoulder, she pointed a clawed hand in the direction other discovery. Entranced, they edged towards the desk. She turned around and asked the coyote, "Is this it?"

Kaolin politely nodded, "It is. What your kin commissioned me to make over the fall." Despite his reserved tone, he wagged his tail, pleased with himself.

The metal tree was roughly a half meter in height. Its central pole trunk, composed of spiraling, interlocking silvery-white alloy scales, rippled with

texture. The branches angled out in a symmetrical bent pattern, providing support for leaves. Resembling the scales which lined the main trunk, the tree's metal leaves twisted in a helical fashion around the outer limbs of the branches. The metal foil shone in a burnished finish resembling gold. The tips of the upper branches bore cones that resembled golden metal fruit. The light, streaming in from the skylights, was transmuted by the reflecting surfaces into rainbow beams that slowly shifted to and fro, as if the leafy mirrors and branches were swaying gently in a phantom breeze. Yet, no air stirred through the wooden floored shop. Defying optical wisdom, the refracted rays slowly gyrated around invisible lines of rotation.

Rana parted her split lips and purred. "Kaolin, this is... beautiful. Don't you think, Sol?" She placed her hand behind Sol's tawny neck, stroking it lightly.

"It's stunning," Sol replied, ignoring her pawed caress, already lost in thought.

Kaolin waggled his ears slightly and said, "I'm pleased you like it. The tree is already mounted in the shipping case. All I need to do is nail the cover box over it."

Sol found himself studying the packing case, forehead wrinkled slightly, "Is this going to fit in the rental?"

Rana ceased stroking Sol's neck and splayed her ears sideways, twitching her tail, flustered at her single minded spouse. She quietly said, "If you need anything, I'll be outside checking the stowage hatch."

"That's fine with me Rana," Sol absentmindediy replied, "I'll help Kaolin carry it out."

Kaolin stood quietly to one side, his blind eye seemed to flicker red and green flashes from the shop light as if mirroring Rana's mood as she stalked out the shop.

The one-eyed coyote sidled over to the desk and began to place wooden lids around the wooden base.

Sol stared at the tree, wondering how the optical tricks were being played on his eye. Of course, he thought, flecks of microscopic, piezo driven mirrors embedded on the surfaces of the leaves. He finished studying the tree and said, "This is some place you have here, Kaolin. Where did you pick up equipment to make active mirrors?"

"Dumped surplus from a beam weapons factory," Kaolin wuffed a reply. He picked up a mallet and pulled out a sack of nails from a drawer. Sol moved over to steady the wooden panel; Kaolin began tapping the nails in place.

The canine casually spoke, "Once upon a time, I was a weapons engineer for a trading Cartel that decided to start a war, and out of a misplaced loyalty to it, became a soldier for them."

He drove a nail in with one blow. "My eye was fuzed by backscatter from an energy beam at Mymeria, and I spent the rest of the war in a POW camp."

"Not a good place. My sympathies," Sol replied.

"It wasn't that bad, rather boring," Kaolin grunted, pounding nails into the back lid. "I was more worried about how my family was doing in the city." He motioned to Sol. "Shift the loose end of the panel to your right a bit. That's good."

"How did end you up in H'zar?" Sol asked. He wondered why someone with sophisticated engineering skills would end up in poverty stricken H'zar.

The coyote replied, "The war ended, and being a soldier with the losing Cartel, I was banned from holding a job in the cities. Couldn't apply for credit either. We ended up in one of the few provinces that accepted refugees, H'zar."

Kaolin studied the almost finished box with his live eye, rubbing a paw against his nose. "Being city bred, I only heard of H'zar from my grandsire's recollections. It's ironic in a way, returning to the place my elder kin worked so hard to escape from."

He tilted the wooden top cover and carefully placed it on the shipping box with the care and ceremony of lowering a coffin lid in its place.

Sol blanched inwardly. He forgot about reparations the government imposed on the rebels, a punishment that affected only those of modest means. The wealthy had long ago exploited the loopholes in the laws.

Kaolin continued, "One of the Cartels dumped war surplus in the village junkyard. It's down the road a ways..." More nails went in under the mallet.

"...unwanted holographic imagers, projectors, metal forming and optical sputtering equipment — still useable. I salvaged and bartered most of it for supplies and building materials for the shop and hut."

"It must have been a challenge," Sol said, hunting for words to avoid sounding patronizing, "for your family to adjust to."

Kaolin reached into the sack, pulling out the last few nails to secure the packing case lid.

"First two years here were hard..." He hesitated, studying the nails as if aware of them for the first time. "And memorable. I started using the machinery to make knick-knacks and sell them on the roadside."

Sol replied, "Your family must be proud of your achievements in art. I take it they help with the chores here?"

Kaolin's jowls tightened as he pounded in the final nails to the lid. He looked at Sol with his working eye, twitched an ear before muttering, "No, I do it all myself."

He placed the mallet down on the desk, "During the tourist season, I hire a few raccoons from Lowpoint to help run the till and display showroom. Off season, it's just me."

The canine swung his forepaw around, as if showing off the shop. "In a way, this place has become my true home. I spend my days here pounding optical swords into sylvan plowshares for the enjoyment of tourists."

He wiped his forepaws and said, "Now let's find out if it'll fit through the hatch on the rental."

Sol turned around, expecting to see Rana by the shop doorway. He thought to himself, what's she up to?

The pair lifted up the heavy box and sidled towards the entrance.



Damn his thick head, Rana snorted to herself. She opened the rear cargo hatch of the rental, noting it was perfectly able to carry the boxed up gift. And nothing between us seems to mean much anymore, she sadly thought, drooping her tail down. She raised her head above the hatch and noticed, between the dual huts up the hill, the little, perky eared coyote pup standing on the porch. She watched Rana, waving a forepaw.

Unlike before, the pup was now dressed in a deep gold, frilly blouse. A rest day outfit, Rana suspected, probably the little whelp's only set of decent clothing. Abruptly, another figure seemed to come out of a doorway of the whitewashed hut.

In contrast to her earlier patchy outfit, the silver furred coyote woman looked resplendent in a maroon silk dress with decorative lapels. She stood in the roofed breezeway and sat down on a bench seat. The small pup scrambled into her lap. She nuzzled her whelp and raised her narrow muzzle in the direction of the parked rental, teeth parted in a wraith of a smile.

She must be Kaolin's spouse, Rana thought. The youthful mother had obviously bolted back into the hut to put on finery for herself and pup. She seemed a bit young for the white muzzled Kaolin, but Rana reminded herself coyotes are different. The catamount recalled the tourist pamphlet which described customs among H'zarites. It was protocol, she understood at last. A H'zar wife would not receive visitors without being dressed in an appropriate manner. Work clothes would not do.

Rana smiled inwardly at the opportunity to chat with Kaolin's wife and exchange pleasantries. Maybe she'd be able to find some way to discretely lend some aid to them. She moved around the rental towards the path, tail flicking in uncertainty, wondering who should speak first.

She called out in a loud voice, "Good afternoon, my spouse is picking up a sculpture. May I come up to the porch?"

Rana hesitated, then thought she saw a ghost of a nod from the silver furred coyote, indicating she could approach. She hiked up the dirt path towards the hut.

As she approached, her tail started to jerk as if sensing the out of place. She wrinkled her nostrils, smelling nothing but old kitchen smells. Despite that, she continued walking until she stood a few paces away from the still pair standing on the breezeway. Their haunted, frozen eyes seemed to bore into hers.

Unsure what to do, Rana held her paw out in greeting, "I'm Rana Suasu, you must be Kaolin's missus?"

Rana stepped up onto the wooden porch. As she advanced, the coyote's face seemed to erupt in swirling patches of intense light, blinding Rana.

Startled, she yowled in surprised as she was engulfed in the whirlpool...



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Heads down, Kaolin and Sol grunted together as they hored the heavy, wooden box into the rental. Sol rubbed his back while Kaolin closed the rental cargo hatch.

Abruptly, Kaolin splayed his triangular ears humbly. He said, "I forgot to get the name plate, be right back."

He turned and trotted into the shop.'

Rana's yowling snapped Sol's ears to attention. Looking up at the pathway, he saw her silhouette on the porch, surrounded by scintillating discs of light.

The flashes triggered old reflexes. Instinctively, he dived low and charged up the slope in an evasive manner, as he did years ago at Mymeria to avoid being burnt to a cinder by enemy energy beams.

He leaped up the porch steps, claws outstretched, ready to render the enemy to shreds. At once, the flickering wall of light died. He slammed his hind paws against the porch floorboards, almost bowling over Rana.

Mymeria's cratered boulevards and pockmarked towers receded back into Sol's memories. The feline found himself standing in a wooden breezeway with Rana. He panted raggedly, flexing his claws, trying to calm himself.

Rana huddled up against the wall, tail shivering from witnessing the unearthly fire in Sol's eyes. Her forepaw rested on a large touch pad mounted on the side of the green hut. Her flailing arms had pressed the pad and extinguished the light show just as Sol charged up the porch.

"Sol... speak to me, are you okay?"

Panting, green eyes ablaze, Sol growled, "Just what in blazes were you doing!!?"

Stunned and sobbing, she looked up at Sol, "I... I was walking up to the porch to visit with Kaolin's wife and pup."

"Kaolin?"

She took a breath and regained her composure, "I had just stepped up onto the porch when all of sudden they vanished under all this light."

Sol ceased panting, his eyes and expression returning back to normal.

They looked around the empty porch. A dozen round gold burnished mirrors were embedded into the walls of the huts. A wire from the touchpad climbed up the wall. Sol looked up. The wire led to a spherical device with lenses hanging from a roof beam, a projector.

Rana stood at the entry-way threshold to one of the Dog Trot huts. She said, "Sol, take a look."

Following her lead, Sol glanced inside the green painted hut to his left.

Despite the dim light from the curtained windows, they witnessed a scene of disarray. Unlike the bright, neat pictures in the tourist brochure, the interior of Kaolin's communal hut was a dismal heap of papers surrounding a crude sleeping pad. The tiny kitchen sink and counter were almost buried under a heap of filthy dishes, encrusted with the remains of meals. Rana wrinkled her nose in disgust, as no spouse with any sense of pride would ever tolerate such squalor in a household.

Curious, the couple turned around and walked over to the door-less entrance of the white colored cabin.

The second hut of a Dog Trot was, according to Rana's pamphlet, supposed to be the den for the Alpha pair. Inside the open doorway, the odors of dust and stone greeted them. The room was barren. There was enough light from the doorway to illuminate a marble stone table in the center. On top of it were two alabaster urns, the funerary tops were carved in the likenesses of coyotes.

Rana turned to Sol. She was about to open her mouth, when Kaolin galloped up onto the breeze-way porch.

"I'm sorry...", he panted, tongue napping about, "I heard you scream. I'm so sorry to have caused you distress." He looked about. His cataract eye, lit up by the afternoon light, seemed to flicker in clouds of confused color.

"I have a holographic projector mounted in the breezeway." Still breathing noisily, he pulled out a small black box out of his pants pocket, "The remote control, I must have triggered it accidentally when I walked down the pathway."

Rana looked at Kaolin in sympathy, Sol remained puzzled, until Kaolin caught his breath.

"When I returned from the war," the canine said, "we were forced to leave the city. I built this hut, found a discarded holographic projector and set it up to record them; two season's worth."

After several long moments of silence, he continued, "Thirteen seasons ago, to this day, I drove a junked vehicle I repaired into town to sell it. Wilema..."

Kaolin paused, his sightless, damaged eye, lit by the afternoon sunlight, flickered a deep lily blue, "Wilema decided to take Thecia to the village. They were walking down the side of the road."

The coyote pointed down the hill, his normal eye glaring at Sol and Rana. "You've driven over it! Jammed with Road Trains going too fast... They were hit from behind."

Sol opened his mouth, but Kaolin cut him off by saying, "You've seen enough! Your gift is packed. Go! Leave me in peace!" His ears and tail hung down as the coyote shuddered. He motioned the pair towards the rental parked down the hill.

Sol and Rana humbly walked down the path. Kaolin followed a few meters behind. He turned off the path and strode over to the stool left next to the shop, picked it up and began dragging it up the hill. Stopping at a flat spot halfway up, he sat down on the stool, his backside turned towards the parking lot.

Opening the rental's doors, Sol flopped down heavily into the driver's seat. He glanced at Rana, her split lips quivering, ear tips perked forward. For a few moments their eyes tried to bridge the gap. For once, Sol was prepared to listen — a murmur of reassurance, an enlivening touch.

Rana sat mute. For once, she had nothing to say. Compared to Kaolin, they had everything fortune could grant, but nothing to show for it. They shut their respective doors. Sol retreated within his Mymeria memories as he activated the fuel cells and steered the rental around. Rana returned to fingering her sorrel dress. The boxed up tree lay in the cargo bin, forgotten and ignored.

The vehicle's tires rolled through the gravel. Rana and Sol silently gazed at the receding hut through their rearview mirrors. And in the space between the mirrors and the corner of a limestone hill, Kaolin sat on his stool, facing the roofed porch stage, unfolding the holographic images of his dead missus and pup.



Her silver fur shined in the cold fall air as she touched her silk lapel, yellow eyes flickering as she picked up her daughter. Optical echoes waved to the melancholy single eyed projectionist. Recorded memories of a stillborn dream danced on the breezeway.





"You still threw it." Bridget smiled smugly and rested her muzzle on her paws. "Anyway, I din' say you should throw it at the old house. I just said you throw like a girl."

Sharlin bit back a reply. It didn't do any good to tell his sisters they threw like girls too. He looked at the old house again and listened. No sounds came over the breeze to him except the creaks of settling wood.